

«I wanted to contribute to the uplifting of the lower classes, with the advent of justice and Christian charity».

**La Chronique du Sud-Est (1889-1903):
implied author, mock reader, and contemporary relevance**

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Introduction

The figure of Léon Jean Dehon, a priest, religious, founder of a religious institute, spiritual director, preacher of Papal encyclicals, social reformer, a constant and consistent writer on socio-political-religious issues, and a pioneer of social Catholicism in France etc., manifest the aura and the enigmatic personality of 19th century. His continuous efforts and ceaseless contributions, particularly through his writings, unveil the very soul of Dehon himself, one of such contributions are found from 1889-1903; a fifteen years of the part of his life, a significant period of his apostolate.

For our study, we begin with a deeper study of the years from 1889-1903, followed by an elaborate history of the social engagement of Dehon mostly through his writings with an emphasis to *La Chronique du Sud-Est*. Later, we move to the structural distribution of thesis into three parts, such as, Reading Dehon in His Texts, where we analyse the literary style and the genres of the writings of Dehon, the methodology, and relevant content of the texts of Dehon. Secondly, we focus on the challenges and problems of the context that Dehon as the author mentioned in his texts. Thirdly, the relevance of these texts to the 21st century and their possible application or in another words: Reading Dehon Today.

Why 1889-1903?

During the period of 1889-1903, Fr. Dehon's reflections were heavily influenced by his work on the *Social Question*, his commitment to democracy, and his efforts to establish his new religious order, the *Oblates of the Sacred Heart*, despite challenges from within the Church. **Albert Bourgeois** says: «In 1889, Dehon founded a magazine, *The Reign of the Heart of Jesus in Souls and Societies*. This was for him the beginning of an important activity as a publicist. He published most of his writings and essays there; his works even appeared there at first in articles». **Bourgeois**, in his presentation of his work, *Le Père Dehon et Le Règne du Coeur de*

Jésus (1889-1892), tells us, *The Reign of the Heart of Jesus*, is fifteen years of Father Dehon's life; fifteen years of overflowing activity, the great years of his social action, marked by congresses, conferences, and various publications, both spiritual and social: fifteen years of trials as well, from the summer of 1889 to that of 1893 when Father Dehon left *Saint-Jean*, then, beyond the suffering of the General Chapter of 1896, until the expulsion of his Congregation and its religious and the forced emigration to Brussels in 1903; fifteen years also, if not of fame, at least of national and international commitment. His name appears in various journals, and his writings are readily referenced in the press. The congresses: fifteen years of great development for his Congregation, not only in Europe (Luxembourg, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Rome), but also in northern Brazil, the Congo (Zafra), southern Brazil, Denmark, and, for a time, Tunisia.

What has become of these years? Is it only a social warfare or a response to the Social Question? Bourgeois responds: It is undoubtedly relatively easy to recount the story of Father Dehon during those years of great activity, the peak of his priestly and religious life; relatively easy to follow him in his travels and numerous journeys; relatively easy also to expound his social doctrine, the evolution of his thought in its profound continuity.

Therefore, in his biography, *Leo Dehon and His Message*, **Giuseppe Manzoni** extends the dates of Dehon's social apostolate from 1888 to 1908, twenty years of a longer career. Manzoni writes: «As a young chaplain in the industrial city of *Saint Quentin*, Leo Dehon was moved by the social decay and his own apostolic zeal to become interested in the world of work. This included apprentices, labourers, students, entrepreneurs. From that time on, his goal was to find a just solution to the social question. He made every effort to sensitize parish priests and seminarians about social problems so that they would leave their sacristies and go to the people». In fact, the description of Manzoni systematically summarizes the very soul of these texts of Dehon.

On another occasion, speaking about the decade (1893-1903), **Bourgeois** recalls a spiritual union along with social reformation: «Our purpose here is to acknowledge the path traveled during these years of 'intertwined life... from 1893 to 1903,' not only in terms of his activities themselves, but also and especially in terms of his spiritual experience. If we wish to retain the key dates indicated by him, between the two major periods of profound union with God and the Heart of Jesus (1866-1892 and 1912), what became of this union from 1893 to 1903?» Certainly, these years manifest a collage of spiritual and social transformation in the

very life of Dehon himself. These years stand as a response to the revelation at *Paray-le-Monial*: Social Reign of the Sacred Heart.

Moreover, 1889 was the centenary of the great Revolution of 1789 and...for devotees of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, it was also the bicentenary of the «given up of the Sacred Heart to King Louis XIV» in 1689. On this occasion, Dehon seized the opportunity to launch his small journal, *The Reign of the Heart of Jesus in Souls and Societies*. For us, Priests of the Sacred Heart, it marks the episcopal approval of *The Association of Prayer, Action, and its Crisis*, founded by Fr. Dehon¹ (8 February 1889), and the founding of the Clairefontaine school² (12 June 1889). This is undoubtedly because it seemed impossible to encompass all fifteen years (from 1889 to 1903) at once, but also because a first overview of the publication revealed that 1893 marked not only a break in Father Dehon's own life, but also a kind of turning point, if not in the aim and program, at least in the strategy and content of the journal. Dehon, in his *Memoirs*, writes «to the uplifting of the masses through the reign of Christian justice and charity», recovery for which, he continues, «I have spent a good part of my life... in my publications on social studies, in my lectures in Rome and elsewhere, and in my participation in a multitude of congresses» (Memoirs XI, in LC no. 388). The journal also bears witness to this in the years 1893-1903. This will undoubtedly need to be nuanced by subsequent study, but it is certain that, from 1891-1892... after the publication of the major encyclicals of Leo XIII (*Rerum Novarum*, 15 May 1891 on the social question, and "In the midst of solitudes", 16 February 1892). On the other hand, 1903 marks some significant events in the life of Dehon: 60th Anniversary of his life (1843-1903); 25th Anniversary of his religious profession (1878-1903); Death of Pope Leo XIII (2 March 1810-20 July 1903).

Hence, as **Bourgeois** says, our objective is not to rewrite a biography of Father Dehon or the history of those years of life involved, of his ardent social campaign, which lasted at least ten years (1893 to 1903), or fifteen years (1889-1903), or twenty years (1888-1908). It is a continuation of our study on Dehon and the Reign of the Heart of Jesus. A Reign that definitely isn't to be found up in the clouds but the vital current events of our world. A Reign that he does not serve from outside; And to this, he consecrates the rich qualities of his heart and mind, indeed, his entire life.³

¹ Cfr. NQ IV 77

² Cfr. NQ 85v

³ DEH1991-08-EN, 18.

History of *La Chronique du Sud-Est*⁴

The term «Social Question» seems to be outdated for us today, but it was much debated in the epoch of Dehon. All of France was traumatized by political turmoil in the wake of the French Revolution, and the working class was further stressed by the ongoing Industrial Revolution. At this juncture, the Church offered the hope to the pauperised⁵ working class, particularly in France: Leo XIII and Leo John Dehon. The entire priestly and religious life of Dehon stands as a response to the *Social Question*: His ministry at St. Quentin, Founding of the St. Joseph's Youth Club, St. John's College, His writings to various magazines, establishing his own magazine *La Régne*, his engagements and involvement in various Congresses etc.,

There were different groups of Church leaders who wanted to combat the social evil, among whom were, Absolutists⁶, Republicans⁷, and Democrats⁸. In 1869, Dehon received his first appointment in the largest city of the district of *Aisne* in the Picardy region of northern France, and heavily industrialized city of *Saint Quentin* with 30,000 souls.

Perroux writes: «Dehon gave his whole heart and much of his time getting to know people through personal contact». Dehon advised the priests of his time to engage themselves in the lives of farmers and workers, learn about their living conditions, their food, their salaries, their children and the elderly, their mutual aid societies etc. Dehon's intention was to convince the people to believe in the Church which knew not only forming the pious souls but also of bringing about social justice.

At the background of *Saint Quentin*, Dehon was getting exposed to the *Social Question* of his time. In 1870's, he started a Newspaper, organized St. Joseph Youth Club, and *Workers Circle* for young apprentices and workers living far from home.

⁴ Cfr. *La Chronique du Sud-Est*, founded by Victor Berne and Marius Gonin in 1892, Lyon. Dehon was a regular contributor to this journal from 1897 to 1907.

⁵ Cfr. Paul Maguire notes in *The Rise of Social Catholicism in the 19th Century* that *pauperism* is a specific type of poverty: a «systemic condition in which working men and women are no longer able to maintain the minimal requirements that are essential for human survival».

⁶ Cfr. The 19th-century absolutists were mostly conservative factions trying to restore or maintain pre-revolutionary power structures.

⁷ Cfr. Republicans regained power just before Dehon came to his first parish, and anti-clericalism, and even persecution of the church, became common into the next century. A triumphalistic Church that was allied with the rich and powerful had become a persecuted sect in a radically secular society.

⁸ Cfr. Among the Church leaders, there were also voices that argued for democracy, rejecting alliances with the powers and the freedom of conscience.

He collaborated with *Albert de Mun*⁹ and *René de La Tour du Pin*¹⁰, who began a *Catholic Circle Movement* in 1871. Dehon happened to meet his close associate Léon Harmel¹¹ in one of the assemblies of CCM.

In 1876, Dehon was asked to address the seminarians at *St. Sulpice* on the Social Question, which gradually led to the annual conferences at *Val-des-Bois*¹² until 1901.

From 1877-1878, Dehon spent a complete year of solitude and silence for something significant in his life, a call within a call: vocation to religious life to found a Congregation of the Oblates of the Heart of Christ.

From 1878-1888, he dedicated himself in the upbringing of his institute and in the direction of St. John's College.

In 1888, Dehon obtained the «Decree of Praise» from Rome. He went to Rome to thank Pope Leo XIII for the Decree, where he received the famous instruction of His Holiness Leo XIII, «Preach my Encyclicals». ¹³ *Rerum Novarum* would not appear for almost three years,

⁹ **Albert de Mun** (1841–1914), a French politician and Catholic. An uncompromising Legitimist, who fought for a long time for the restoration of the monarchy, but after 1892 he yielded to the requests of Leo XIII and joined the Third Republic, aligning himself with the conservative and nationalist right. He was very active in social causes and was one of the founders of the *Catholic Workers' Circles* (1871). He was elected to the French Academy on April 1, 1897.

¹⁰ **La Tour du Pin** (1834-1924) was a descendant from an old noble dauphinoise family, which instilled a strong Catholic and Royalist identity in the young René. La Tour du Pin's father instilled a spirit of noblesse oblige in the young boy, along with a deep care for his local community and the people that lived in it, especially its poorer members. After witnessing the unrest and the injustice in French society, *La Tour du Pin* and *Mun* were determined to respond to the dilemma of the working class. The following year they organized a Catholic Workers' club, under the name *L'Oeuvre des Cercles Catholique d'Ouvriers* (Society of Catholic Worker Circles), at the request of Maurice Maignen (founder of the Brothers of St. Vincent de Paul). The movement provided a theoretical framework for Catholic politics in France.

¹¹ **Léon Harmel** (1829–1915), a French industrialist and Catholic, and the owner of prosperous *Val-des-Bois* spinning mill in Warmeriville along with his family. Continuing and expanding his father's work—who had promoted the establishment of various charitable works to assist his workers—he made his company a model of cooperation and co-management between owners and employees, in accordance with the ideal of Christian corporatism and the principles of social doctrine defined by Leo XIII in the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891). He supported the policy of aligning with the Third Republic and was one of the driving forces behind the nascent French Christian Democratic movement. In 1861, he joined the Franciscan Third Order. He was appointed Commander of the Order of St. Gregory the Great and Knight of the Order of Pius IX.

¹² Cfr. In the late 1890s, *Val-des-Bois* was a site for social study meetings for priests and seminarians, which were part of Fr. Dehon's broader efforts to address *The Social Question* and promote Christian social action. As a fruit of his close association with Harmel, Dehon sent his confreres, a notable one was Fr. Charcosset, to work at *Val-des-Bois*. The meetings held here were part of Fr. Dehon's larger social engagement (1888–1908), which included establishing youth clubs, workers' circles, and promoting *Rerum Novarum* etc.

¹³ Cfr. André Perroux writes: His invitation from Leo XIII to “make known his Encyclicals” produced in him a most resolute attitude. Like a spark, it re-kindled the fire of his zeal for this action which he carried out unremittingly, with creativity and tenacity. It was this complete and ardent fidelity to the teaching of the Popes which, in the main, was the cause of the amazing development, already mentioned, of Fr. Dehon. This fidelity was able to renew the courage he needed to face risks and sacrifices, misunderstandings, criticisms and loss of friends, in a country which was at that time in complete religious turmoil. And then, in spite of reservations among his friends, he insisted on giving his backing to the building of the church of Christ the King in Rome, “in any case,

but at that point 27 of the 85 encyclicals Leo would eventually issue had already been promulgated. Dehon would follow that command from that moment until Leo XIII's death (1903) twenty years later.

On the occasion of centenary of the French Revolution (1789-1889), in January of 1889, Dehon launched his magazine, *The Reign of the Sacred Heart in Souls and Society*. Dehon wrote: «It is necessary that the veneration of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which was begun in the mystical life of souls, come down and enter into the social life of the world's peoples. It will bring the sovereign remedy to the cruel ills of our moral world».

Dehon was aware of the drastic changes of the society and the damage caused by Socialism, which gradually led the people and the society into atheistic state. He insisted on the collaboration of the State with the Church for the welfare of the working class. In 1889, he condemned Socialism.

However, Dehon's social vision would not come to maturity until the 90's, with the publication of *Rerum Novarum* (On the Rights and Duties of Capital and Labor). Dehon himself was not won over to the side of democracy until he read Pope Leo XIII's famous encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. In July 1891, there appeared an article in *The Reign* entitled "The Encyclical of May 15 on the Social Question": *Rerum Novarum*.

In a November 1892 article entitled *Democracy and the Sacred Heart*, Dehon reflected on the promise of «Liberté, Fraternité and Égalité» (liberty, fraternity, equality) that had accompanied the French Revolution. In 1892, after many Republicans had begun to consider a more tolerant policy toward the church, Pope Leo had issued a letter stressing that the Church is not bound to any political regime and accepts legally constituted governments, whether monarchies or republics, in order to work together for the common good. Leo XIII stated: «Anyone who regards political party, no matter how worthy its cause, as more important than the defense of religion, is promoting the politics of division and conflict rather than the politics of unity, which is in the best interest of religion as well as the common good».

Dehon openly supported Leo XIII's policy of rapprochement. In the July 1892 issue of *The Reign*, he had written: «Leo is clairvoyant when he declares that the future belongs to democracy».

this work is for the Sacred Heart and for the Pope": that was its sole justification, and quite sufficient. Cfr. DEH1991-08-EN, 39.

In 1895, the Conferences on Social Question conducted primarily at Saint Sulpice and continued at Val-des-Bois, were needed to be moved to St. John's College in Saint Quentin. In 1895, the first of these was a *Veritable Congress*, «with 200 priests from over 30 dioceses». Various topics were of significant discussion, such as, *Education of the Clergy*, *Social Action by the Clergy*, *Christian Democracy*, and *Modern Usury*.

In May 1896 Fr. Dehon took part in the 3rd Congress of Workers' Study Circles, as one of 600 delegates, and immediately after that in the congress of the Circle Movement in Paris. In August of that year, he was a doctrinal expert at a congress of 700 priests in Reims, at which every social problem was discussed in light of Pope Leo's encyclicals. In that same month and city, he attended the Congress of the Franciscan Third Order in that same city, giving a presentation on usury, banks, industry, commerce and the evil effects of poverty.

In August 1897, Dehon was in Nimes for the fourth congress of the Third Order, and after a discussion on the subject of wealth, he co-authored a pamphlet, "Wealth: Moderate Means or Poverty?" By 1897, Christian Democracy had reached its high-water mark, and in December of that year held its own congress in Lyons. Dehon, like Harmel, eschewed all political involvement, but from 1897-1900 he couldn't avoid it. The pope wanted to see Christian Democracy succeed, and Dehon's good relationships with conservative Catholics, monarchists, and Rome made him an important bridge-builder between the groups.

Despite his best efforts, though, in the general elections of 1898, right-wing and left-wing Catholics cancelled each other out, to the benefit of the radicals and Socialists. After the Catholics' disastrous defeat in the general elections of 1898, radicals and Socialists in France gained power, and the six year "détente" between Church and State was over.

In 1895, in Dehon's introduction to Part II of the *Christian Social Manual*, he had written to his fellow priests, "We must go to the people! ...those are the words of Leo XIII." However, there were growing numbers of young priests who welcomed *Rerum Novarum* and wanted to «go to the people» and spread Pope Leo's message. These *Abbés Démocratés* (democratic priests) were not an organized body, but individually they had influence as journalists, public speakers, editors of periodicals, and in a few cases as members of parliament, and Dehon was often mentioned as among their number.

In 1900, Dehon published *Christian Social Renewal*, based on lectures he had given in Rome to audiences of hundreds, including many Bishops and Cardinals. With the death of

Leo XIII in July of 1903, Fr. Dehon's social apostolate, at least in its public aspects, greatly diminished. Dehon's source of papal social directives «dried up», says **Manzoni**.

In November 1903, Dehon decided to stop publication of his magazine *The Reign of the Sacred Heart in Souls and Societies*, which he had begun twelve years earlier. Afterwards, he contributed to other social journals, his longest association being with *La Chronique du Sud-Est* (the South-East Chronicle). From 1898 through 1903, it carried a piece by him every month, and occasionally from 1904 to 1908. After 1908, his social apostolate was essentially finished.

On the eve of his 69th birthday of 1912, Dehon wrote a long letter to his religious, known under the title *Souvenirs*. Recalling his many social works - his numerous works at *St. Quentin*, the Congresses in which he participated, and his social writings and lectures - he tells them, «I wanted to contribute to the uplifting of the lower classes, with the advent of justice and Christian charity». He concludes: «in this area, too, the work must continue. The masses are not yet convinced that the Church alone possesses the true and practical answers to all social questions».

Hence, for our study, in total, there are 52 articles in the span of 15 years (1889-1903), of which, we have selected 42 articles to identify and to rediscover Dehon in his text and context. We divided the articles into six parts: 1889-1892, 1893-94, 1895, 1896-97, 1899-1900, 1901-03 and made a profound study and research on reading and knowing the Founder from his writings. These texts mainly are the articles written by Dehon in *Le Règne*, which were later published in *La Chronique du Sud-Est*. Dehon collaborated occasionally with Catholic journals such as *L'Association Catholique de Paris* and *La Démocratie Chrétienne de Lille*, and these are only a few articles. On the contrary, a notable importance for the problems considered, such as, problem of workers' class, rise of socialism, illustration, social democracy etc., are addressed in *La Chronique du Sud-Est* (founded by Victor Berne and Marius Gonin in 1892, Lyon). Dehon was a regular contributor to this journal from 1897 to 1907. Later, it took the title of *La Chronique Sociale de France* in 1909, which is still today a well-known and lively bimonthly review.

1. Reading Dehon in His Texts (1889-1903)

These texts of Dehon chronicled the experience of a history both in the Church and in France. They mark an important episode in the life of Dehon as an author, priest, founder of a religious institute, promulgator of the encyclicals of Leo XIII, moreover, a partizan of France. These texts necessitate the examination of political, social, religious, and cultural events in Dehon's life. They depict Dehon as a dedicated and active leader involved in a bunch of reformatory activities: A pioneer of Catholic social teaching, helping to shape its practical expression in the late 19th century; A strong supporter of the papacy and promoter of *Rerum Novarum*; A conservative thinker deeply concerned with the preservation of Christian order and morality; A figure whose legacy is both influential and shaped by the historical context and tensions of his time.

1.1 Textual Reading of Dehon

The reading of these texts can be categorized into the genres of social analysis, religious commentary, and historical reflection. There are several topics, such as, Socialism, The Lamentable Condition, and Social Duties of Employees, are identified as chapters from the Christian Social Manual. Themes such as Papal Discourses; Pilgrimage of workers to Rome; Propagation of Christian Social Ideas; A Crisis of the Social Reign of Jesus Christ in France; The Pope: Hopes and Forebodings etc., describe the origins and contents of this Manual. They present a commentary on an encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, by Pope Leo XIII, and above all, Dehon's texts are found to be a source of a historical study both on the ecclesiastical and political levels.

1.2 Anti-Semitic Ideology

In his 1898's work *Social Catechism*, Dehon wrote that Jewish people «willingly favour all the enemies of the Church». Dehon raises an ambiguous discussion about Jewish, Islamic, Schismatics, Heretics, and Idolaters. He voices out about the damage caused by Jews in Europe by posing a question: «Are not the Jews causing a veritable panic today in Europe because of their power?» and at the same time, Dehon mentions about the possibility of mission to the Islamic world but in a negative connotation, i.e., «to awaken apathetic populations»¹⁴. The army of the anti-Christ is a wakeup call to be aware of the menace of the antichrist, in

¹⁴ *Le Règne* 1889/1, 5

particular free-masonry and Jewish, their method and progress in dominating the nation. Nevertheless, Dehon's comments on Jewish people forecast the reality of his time, not hatred nor enmity. Moreover, the anti-Semitic movements in his epoch manifested signs of hope. Dehon, renowned as the «Social Apostle», condemned anti-Semitism and defended the poor, the working class against the injustices of his time.¹⁵ On the contrary, albeit Dehon was known to have protested against anti-Semitism in France, some of his statements, in reference to 'usury' by Jews, depict him to be anti-Semitic.

1.3 Reformative Thoughts

In these articles Dehon as author addresses various themes and genres. He was one of a very few central figures in organizing and participating in social, religious, and workers' congresses in France, particularly during the late 19th century as part of his efforts to promote Christian social teaching. Dehon explicitly mentioned his participation in a series of social meetings and congresses throughout France, notably the one held at St. Quentin in 1896. His main focus and his speeches were oriented towards promoting worker associations and addressing social injustice, which were essential parts of his *social studies* and *Christian social action* initiatives. Besides attending these meetings, Dehon often played an organizational role in diocesan meetings for social studies and worked closely with lay collaborators to create Catholic newspapers and workers' programs. He recommended an effective means to reach out to the people; hence, he emphasized the importance of the press in social movements to bring the Goodnews of Democracy (Christian Democracy) to the people.

Dehon raises his voice against the deprivation of the basic rights and needs of the working class of his time. He appears to be prophetic in his approach towards the working class. He demands that the state should collaborate with the Church towards the complete liberty and rights of these people. He demands that the state should regulate the day of rest on Sundays, the work of women and children in the factories, and work at night. Dehon gives an open call to all the capitalists, particularly, all the owners of the factories to collaborate with the workers and treat them with dignity and honour. He promotes the stability of home life for these weaker sections in the society by proposing an amendment of the inheritance laws to have a possibility

¹⁵ Cfr. On 3rd July 2005, Rome, His Excellency Mgr. Ornelas SCJ, in an interview as the Superior General, spoke about Dehon's controversy on anti-Semitism. <https://zenit.org/2005/07/03/in-defense-of-the-founder-of-the-dehonians/>

of land holdings and by encouraging workers to have an insurance policy and union of workers and associations etc.¹⁶ *Val des Bois* provides an example of a factory that is operated based on Christian values and at the same time shows how Christian values could be applied in factories. Thanks to Léon Harmel.

1.4 Spirit of Apostasy

Europe, in the 19th century, presents a religious situation both in the ecclesiastical and social interests. Dehon, through his writings (spiritual and social), comments on various occasions about other religions, particularly, Judaism. In the late 19th century (1870-1900), France encounters inter-religious tensions that were dominated by intense conflict between a resurgent Catholic Church and a rising anti-clerical, secularist Republican government. This struggle focused on state control over education, the decline of Catholic political influence, and deep societal divides between Catholics and free-thinkers, paving the way for the 1905 separation. Some of the key-elements that Dehon commented in his writings during this period (1889-1905) were: *Anti-clericalism, Laicization of Education, Conflict between the Church and the Republic, The Dreyfus Affair, Anti-Semitic controversies* etc.

Dehon uses the term «seduction» to address the issues of progress, well-being, science, and literature, which, from his point of view, makes France vulnerable and a faithless state. This was, indeed, the main concern of Dehon: «the removal of religion from public life and forgetting their faith even in their private lives»¹⁷. Thus, Dehon addresses the question of «apostasy of France»¹⁸ in his writings: apostasy of faith, national apostasy, social apostasy and private apostasy.

1.5 Social Reign of the Sacred Heart

The classical secularization thesis, implying a decline in the importance of “religion” in “modern” societies, has been thoroughly criticized by Dehon. As the homeland of the Revolution and Enlightenment philosophy, France was usually seen as the leading example of the unfolding of modernity and secularity. The emergence of *laïcité* at the end of the 19th century and the separation of Church and state in 1905 are often described as the hallmarks of a longer

¹⁶ *Le Règne* 1889/2, 2-3

¹⁷ *Le Règne* 1889/1, 2

¹⁸ *Le Règne* 1889/1, 1-2

process that reached its peak at the beginning of the 20th century. In fact, Dehon foresaw the consequences of laicization and the secularization long ago.

Dehon had seen that the purpose of the revelation of the Sacred Heart was to denounce reformation and renaissance through a spiritual and social renewal. He felt that Europe was under crisis due to class antagonism, modern pauperism, and progress in literature etc. Hence, he proposes a triangular collaboration: *Religion, State, Elite*. He says: «Religion must sanctify the worker's labour; the State must protect it; and the Elite must assist in it».¹⁹ For Dehon, Catholicism is the most perfect expression of religion that reconciles the worker or the working class against the seductive hopes of socialism. Dehon thrashes the socialist ideas that do no good for the individual workers, instead, he proposes a collaboration between the Church and the State for the common welfare of the working class: keep the Sunday holy so that the workers may practice their religion; protect children from premature exhaustion, protect mothers from labour, set limits on the hours of work beyond which employers would be charged with abuse.

Dehon as an author in these texts manifests sharpness in reading his times, understanding the problems, and proposing ideas or solutions up to the very practical aspects on how to make it done. His texts manifest his very nature as someone who studied his society and the context of his time deeply in order to know the problem and to find solutions. Dehon did not limit himself to addressing the social questions of his time to publications and congresses, moreover, he tackled the issues through his involvement in the movements and social actions. He faced the challenges and contributed to the formation of a new democratic France.

2. Problems and Challenges Highlighted in Dehon's Works

The French society of Dehon's epoch was characterized by extreme volatility, navigating profound structural, political, and economic challenges in the transition from an agrarian society to a modern industrial state. It was a period marked by shifting regimes, social inequality, and violent revolutionary episodes etc. It often faced a political instability, economic and industrial laggardness, socio-economic disparities and urbanization, cultural and ideological struggles, conflict between the Church and the State etc. Dehon lived in the midst

¹⁹ Cfr. *Le Règne* 1889/5, 2

of these tensions both within the Church and the State as a clergy, particularly as the founder of a religious institute and a proponent of the social teachings of the Church through his writings and teachings.

The context, in which, Dehon lived was surrounded with various political, social, and ecclesial problems. The text of the peak period of his social apostolate (1889-1903) contains the problematic issues and the challenges that Dehon faced, moreover, addressed them. Hence, while reading the texts, one finds the problem, which stands as a challenge, and a solution through Dehon's social engagement.

2.1 *Val-des-Bois* Effect

Dehon's social apostolate in France faced intense challenges, including extreme industrial exploitation of workers, resistance from conservative Church elements, social and political volatility. He struggled against profound social inequalities, striving to balance Catholic social doctrine with worker justice amidst rising socialism. Dehon operated in a time where textile workers faced starvation wages, working up to 14 hours a day with severe poverty. The exploitation involved less wages, more hours of work, no Sunday holidays, women and children exploitation in the factories etc.

Dehon collaborated with Léon Harmel at *Val-des-Bois*, a renowned *Christian Factory*, which served as a model for social apostolate and a hub of Christian ministry for Dehonians. Dehon and Harmel were close allies in the Christian democratic movement, united by a devotion to the Sacred Heart and a desire to apply Christian principles to social issues. Between 1887 and 1901, *Val-des-Bois* was a key location where Dehon organized summer formation meetings for seminarians and young priests, promoting the principles of *Rerum Novarum* and the *Christian Factory* model. Dehon sent members of his Congregation to work as chaplains at *Val-des-Bois* and prepared it as a school for his *Christian social renewal*, blending worker rights with Catholic social teaching. Hence, Dehon collaged together the spirituality of the Sacred Heart and Christian social action. The apostolate of Dehonians at *Val-des-Bois* even promoted various pilgrimages to Rome promoting *equality*, *fraternity*, in today's terminology, *synodality*.

2.2 Socialism-Capitalism-Christian Social Action

France in the 19th century is marked by rapid industrialization, social inequality, and secularization. Dehon saw socialism as «mutually exclusive» to religious faith and believed it

represented an overturning of the order established by God. In his magazine, *The Reign of the Sacred Heart in Souls and Society*, he warned against the «fatal errors» of the doctrine. It results in the secularization of the State, that is to say, indifference towards religion, raised to the level of a fundamental principle. Dehon says: «we must give this nation, which is an extension of the family, the protectress of the home, sustenance of our physical and moral life, and a living instrument of a design from on high, a kind of religious veneration». While opposing Socialism, Dehon was critical about Capitalism, describing it as «heartless and pitiless exploitation». Hence, Dehon proposed a solution based on Christian justice and charity. He argued that the rich must treat their wealth as a trusteeship from God and provide workers with a fair share of the fruit of their labour, acting with paternal affection.

Despite opposing socialist ideology, Dehon was pragmatic, stating that «nothing prevents us from meeting with the socialists for a multitude of useful reforms for which they have, indeed, most often borrowed the first idea from us», the Catholic Church. Dehon viewed the roles of the Church and State as crucial, albeit distinct, in promoting human dignity. He believed that true progress was not just economic, but moral, stating that «true progress is that of human dignity». Dehon argued that both (Church and State) institutions needed to move beyond traditional boundaries to protect the dignity of labourers and the poor, shifting from a passive stance to an active *civilization of love*. Dehon emphasized the *Social Question*, urging that the Church must focus on social justice and charity to combat the misery of the working class. He asserted that Capitalists must respect in workers the dignity of a human being and a Christian, and stop treat them as «cheap instruments». Dehon believed that the Church has a very important role to play in the civil society, a place where fraternity and solidarity flourish. In fact, Dehon dreamed of a society filled with Christian virtues. Hence, Dehon gives prioritizes God, Church, and Faith above all. For him, «God is the primary principle of our being, our preservation and our development and our parents and nation occupy the following positions».

Therefore, Dehon proposes to Christianize the Democratic Anthem because the socialism is an enemy to the society unlike the Church which stands for the welfare of the working class: *Rerum Novarum*. Pope Leo XIII told all apostolic people, priests and laity, to «go to the people», which is a program of Christian Democracy. Dehon feels that Catholic Church has the ability to adapt itself to all social situations, because it possesses all of the principles of justice and all the inspirations of charity. We must «go to the people», as Leo XIII asks of us, with a program and with works. We must begin everywhere by forming associations

to help the worker. We must call for legal reforms to protect him, to defend all his rights, step by step, and to improve his economic situation.²⁰

2.3 Educating People Through Ecclesiastical Congrès

Dehon and his social thought cannot be separated from the nascent social doctrine of the Church, embodied in the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* of 1891. Dehon himself as late as 1903 presented himself as «the little phonograph» of Papal encyclicals. A little closer to reality is the expression Dehon uses in his *Souvenirs* of 1912. **André Perroux** notes that Leo XIII would have seen in Dehon «a faithful interpreter» of his encyclicals. *Rerum Novarum* has opened several doors and Dehon increasingly chose to use these open doors to make choices on many debated issues, choices made possible, which, in fact, for Dehon, became simply «the encyclical on the condition of workers». Probably in the Roman Conferences from 1897 to 1900 and in many articles in various journals in these years, the way he himself intended to interpret *Rerum Novarum* becomes more evident. It was evident that Dehon prioritized the conditions of the workers in his journals and Congrès.

After 18 (1876-1894) years of slow growth, the social conferences that started at *St. Sulpice* and continued at *Val-des-Bois* needed to be moved to St. John's College in *St. Quentin*. They addressed various topics including *education of the clergy*, *social action by the clergy*, *Christian democracy*, and (Dehon's favourite) *modern usury*. Dehon calls for clergy's social engagement to address the social issues and problems of the weaker and working class, in order to bring justice and join their hearts and hands along with His Holiness *Leo XIII*. **Giuseppe Manzoni** mentions that Dehon wrote in his diary that «these are memorable days – ardent, shining and unforgettable. It's a mini council, a council made up of youth... this mini congress will be influential in the reawakening of Christian social life in France».

The majority of Dehon's social thought and proposals were developed under the name «Christian Democracy». It was both a concept and a movement, encompassing various currents of Catholic social thought, which never became a true (political) party. For Dehon, especially in the second half of the 1890s, it was the umbrella under which he carried out his social work. In 1897, he was even elected a member of the national leadership of the Christian Democracy. The economic, social, cultural, and political participation of workers in society: these are the

²⁰ REV 8031048/3 (Will we understand?, 1898, p.3)

demands that form the common thread in Dehon's writings and speech. In them, it is clear that he sees the mission and social action of the Church, but also the option for workers, for the poor, rooted in the Scripture itself.

2.4 Collaboration with Prominent Figures of the Social Christian Democracy in France

Dehon knew that some generous Catholics had believed that it was possible to reconcile the Gospel with socialism. The economic doctrines of the communist and socialist *pleiad* - *Auguste Comte*²¹, *Saint-Simon*²², *Cabet*²³ and *Proudhon*²⁴ – had something seductive to superficial minds and people with imagination.²⁵

Besides prominent Catholic figures that tried to synthesize the Social Christian Democracy, there were also Christian Newspapers that visioned a new society unlike the past, such as, *Le Christ Republican*, *Le Christ Democrate et Socialiste*, *Le Vrai Catholique*, *Le Droit du Peuple*, and *Le Peuple Constituant*.²⁶ Unfortunately several of them were slipping imperceptibly toward heresy and were even condemned by the Church. In his writings, Dehon

²¹ Cfr. **Isidore Auguste Marie François Xavier Comte** (1798-1857) was a philosopher, mathematician, and writer who formulated the doctrine of positivism. He is often regarded as the first philosopher of science, whose ideas were fundamental to the development of sociology. He was influenced by Henri de Saint-Simon and attempted to find remedy the social disorder caused by French Revolution. He sought to establish a new social doctrine based on science called *positivism*.

²² Cfr. **Claude Henri de Rouvroy, Comte de Saint-Simon** (1760-1825) was a French political, economic, and socialist theorist, whose thought had a substantial influence on politics, economics, sociology, and the philosophy of science. He created a political and economic ideology (*Saint-Simonianism*) that claimed that the needs of an industrial class, referred to as the working class, must be recognized and fulfilled to have an effective society and an efficient economy. Unlike conceptions within industrializing societies of a working class being manual labours alone, his ideology was more inclusive that included businesspeople, managers, scientists, bankers, and manual labourers etc.

²³ Cfr. **Étienne Cabet** (1788-1856) was a philosopher and utopian socialist, who was renowned for his appeal to artisans who were being undercut by factories. His famous work *Voyage en Icarie* (1839) underlines replacing capitalist production with workers' cooperatives. As a result, he faced recurrent problems with French officials which led him to emigrate to USA in 1848.

²⁴ Cfr. **Pierre-Joseph Proudhon** (1809-1865), a French anarchist, socialist, philosopher, and economist, who founded mutualist philosophy and is considered to be the "father of anarchism". He described the liberty he pursued as the synthesis of community and individualism, which was regarded as part of *social anarchism*. He was also a friend of Karl Marx and both shared their thoughts through various writings.

²⁵ *Le Règne* 1892/1, IV

²⁶ *Le Règne* 1892/1, IV

manifests his disappointment regarding two prominent editors *Lacordaire*²⁷ and *Ozanam*²⁸ who were collaborating with *Ère Nouvelle* and *De Crux*.

Noting that «some generous Catholics had believed that it was possible to reconcile the Gospel with socialism», he reminded his readers that the Pope's encyclical had made clear the *fatal errors* of that doctrine. Dehon emphasizes that «The true solution», which Leo XIII underlined, «lies in the practice of justice and charity». At times, Dehon appears to be protagonist of Papal teaching on social justice and charity, on the other side, he seems to be lenient towards socialist ideology too. Dehon writes: «nothing prevents us from meeting with the socialists for a multitude of useful reforms for which they have, indeed, most often borrowed the first idea from us», the Catholics.

As the years passed by, one can understand that the original thought of Dehon to Christianize the social democracy had taken a shift towards collaboration between the socialists and democrats. Dehon himself was seen to have promoted it through his writings and Congrès.

2.5 Ideological Contrast amidst Social Democracy and Christian Democracy

At first, Dehon dreamed of Christianizing the democratic movement in France; later, he was lenient towards the collaboration with the socialist democracy, despite all of it, these two approaches, in fact, had a major political traditions. Despite sharing a commitment to the welfare state and a social market economy, they differ fundamentally in their origins, philosophical foundations, and views on the role of the state, family, and society. While *Christian Democracy* is rooted in Christian ethics, particularly Catholic social teaching, emphasizing the dignity of the human person, *Social Democracy* is rooted in the democratic

²⁷ Cfr. **Jean-Baptiste Henri-Dominique Lacordaire** (1802-1861) OP (Order of Preachers), a French Catholic priest, journalist, theologian, and political activist. He re-established the Dominican Order in post-Revolutionary France. He was reputed to be the greatest pulpit orator of the nineteenth century. With Frédéric Ozanam and l'Abbé Maret, he launched a newspaper, *L'Ère Nouvelle* (The New Era), to campaign for the rights of Catholics under new regime. Their program mixed traditional Liberal Catholicism's defense of the freedom of conscience and education with Ozanam's Social Catholicism. When *L'Ère Nouvelle* endorsed over more socialist policies, he left the paper's leadership. He supported the Revolutions of 1848 in the Italian states and later the French invasion of Papal States.

²⁸ Cfr. **Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam** (1813-1853) was a French Catholic literary scholar, lawyer, journalist, and equal rights advocate. He founded with fellow students the Conference of Charity, later known as the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. During the French Revolution of 1848, he contributed to various newspapers including *L'Ère Nouvelle*, which he had founded. Ozanam was recognized as a precursor of the Catholic Church's social doctrine, whose cultural and religious origins he wanted to know and on which he wrote books which are still in great demand. He was an earnest and conscientious advocate of Catholic Democracy and of the view that the Church should adapt itself to the changed political conditions consequent to the French Revolution. He denounced the old alliance of *Throne and Altar* and pleaded with the Pope to adopt more liberal positions. He advocated the separation of Church and State as conducive to liberty.

socialist tradition, prioritizing equality and secularism. However, Dehon differed with the Social Democracy regarding secularism because it renounced God. While Dehon acknowledged that the Revolution introduced some generous measures that initially aided the lower classes, he fundamentally castigated it for unleashing an *explosion of hatred and folly*. He condemned the era's massacres, widespread pillage, and the active suppression of Church-led charitable institutions, which he argued resulted in endless war and utter misery.

On the other hand, in a November 1892 article entitled *Democracy and the Sacred Heart*, Dehon reflected upon the triangular promise of *Liberté, Fraternité et Égalité* that had accompanied the French Revolution. Dehon argued that the true fulfilment of *the triangular promise* could only be achieved through Christ's love rather than secular political rebellion. Dehon's reflections on the "triangular promise" of the Revolution evaluated the movement's successes. To counter the violence, social injustice and societal decay, Dehon championed devotion to the Sacred Heart because he believed that true liberty, equality, and fraternity were inherently rooted in the teachings of Jesus Christ. Thus, he posited that rather than pursuing secularist or atheistic political utopias, society should establish the Social Reign of Christ, devoted to the Most Sacred Heart. Dehon maintained that only the Church and the spiritual reconquest of modern political spaces could provide the authentic, lasting brotherhood and justice that humanity yearns for. Dehon sought to demonstrate that the Catholic Church was not only focused on saving souls but was also the premier vehicle for achieving genuine social justice.

2.6 Christianizing the Democracy²⁹

Despite his opposition to socialism, however, Dehon had evolved into a committed democrat, unlike most of his contemporaries in the French Church. He did not share the view of many French Catholic activists who wanted that the church must destroy the Revolution. Instead, Dehon adopted the view of Leo XIII through the preaching of his encyclicals. *Christianiser la Démocratie* was a core sociopolitical anthem championed by Dehon through his writings in various issues of his magazine and his enormous speeches at various Congrès.

²⁹ <https://www.dehoniansocialjustice.org/fr-dehon-and-the-social-question-part-3.html> Cfr. The information about the social question, Democracy and the Church's involvement to Christianize it, is taken from the above site with the title: Reign of the Sacred Heart.

He argued that if the Church resisted democracy, it would be oppressed; if democracy grew without the Church, it would lack vital moral values.

In July 1892 issue of his magazine, Dehon writes about Leo XIII: «Leo is clairvoyant when he declares that the future belongs to democracy». In the January 1893 issue, Dehon summarized the views of the *Intransigents* and the friends of the Pope's policy, concluding that both groups are acting in good faith and want the Church to win. A collaborative effort featuring contributions by *La Tour du Pin* and others, this *Christian Social Manual*, which was first published in August 1894, featured chapters by Dehon on *Freemasonry* and *Judaism*, and *Socialism* and *Anarchy*. He also wrote an appendix on the *Circle Movement* and most of Part II on practical solutions. The manual went through several further editions between 1895 and 1910, exposing tens of thousands to Catholic social teaching. In 1898, he published another major work, *The Social Catechism*, meant as a practical, popular text for priests in ministry.

In August 1897, Dehon was in Nîmes for the fourth congress of the *Third Order*, and after a discussion on the subject of wealth, he co-authored a pamphlet, “Wealth: Moderate Means or Poverty?” Using the Gospels and *Rerum Novarum*, they concluded that while voluntary poverty can be required for some who are specially called, the majority can only be asked to be good stewards of their wealth and not keep more than what is legitimate for their well-being. In 1898, the *Third Order* held an international Congrès in Rome with 15,000 participants. Despite Dehon's and Harmel's efforts, however, the Congrès explicitly stated that the Third Order is “not an organization to promote political economics.” This was a blow not only to them, but also to Leo XIII, who had wanted to see the Third Order focus on the social question.

By 1897, Christian Democracy had reached its high-water mark, and in December of that year held its own congress in Lyons. Dehon, like Harmel, eschewed all political involvement, but from 1897-1900 he couldn't avoid it. The Pope wanted to see Christian Democracy succeed, and Dehon's good relationships with conservative Catholics, monarchists, and Rome made him an important bridge-builder between the groups. Despite his best efforts, though, in the general elections of 1898, right-wing and left-wing Catholics cancelled each other out, to the benefit of the radicals and Socialists. After six years of truce between Church and State, many religious had returned to their convents, colleges, and chapels, and Catholic works had flourished.

In brief, Dehon emphasized social justice over radicalism because he argued that unmerited misery of the masses, monopolies of the noble class, socialism and radical individualism of the elite could only be overcome through the practical application of Christian justice and charity. As a faithful son of the Church and a loyal friend to the Supreme Pontiff Leo XIII, Dehon urged his contemporaries and his followers “*to leave the sacristy and go to the people*” and become friends with the working class. He believed that the Church functions as a place of refuge, where one finds moral compass and dignity of the person emphasized. In this vision of Christianizing the spirit of democracy, Dehon makes another step of attributing it to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, whose kingdom of love and solidarity reigns over political and economic structures, rather than just individual hearts and souls.

2.7 Catholicism as unique religious remedy to Social Question

The crisis of poverty and inequality, rapid growth of socialism and secularism, disturbance between Church and the State, and worker alienation driven by rapid industrialization etc., as such were part of the main concerns of the socio-ecclesial concerns of the time of Dehon, of which, he argued that a return to Christian values, and the Church, was the only remedy for the societal fractures. Prior to Dehon, there were other Christian figures like Félicité de Lamennais³⁰, Frédéric Ozanam³¹, and journalist Charles de Coux³², who through their writings sought to reconcile the Church with the modern world. They argued that Christian ethics required a living wage and a structural support for the impoverished masses.

Dehon openly criticized the classical secularization thesis, socialism and individualism, implying a decline in the importance of religion in modern societies. As the homeland of the

³⁰ Cfr. **Félicité Robert de La Mennais** or **Lamennais (1782-1854)** was a French Catholic Priest, philosopher and a political theorist, and was one of the most influential intellectuals of Restoration France. He was also considered the forerunner of both liberal Catholicism and Modernism. In 1817, he published a book *Essai sur l'indifférence en matière de religion*, in which he underlined issues connecting with Church and the State. His ideas embraced an enlarged suffrage, separation of Church and State, universal freedom of conscience, and the Press. In 1830, he founded *L'Ami de l'Ordre* (precursor of *L'Avenir*) along with **Montalembert** and **Lacordaire**. In 1833, he abandoned the Church and in 1834, he wrote *Paroles d'un Croyant*, which Pope Gregory XVI condemned for its philosophical theories.

³¹ Cfr. Founder of the **Society of St. Vincent de Paul**, **Ozanam** viewed the ideals of the French Revolution (Liberté, Égalité, et Fraternité) as inherently social rather than political. By founding the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, he intended to provide direct material and financial assistance to the poor, actively engaging in the critical issues of the Parisian working class. Dehon, himself, was a very active member of this Society during his youth in Paris.

³² Cfr. **Charles de Coux (1787-1864)** was a precursor of social Catholicism and a member of the circle of Félicité de Lamennais. Coux was one of the editors of *L'Avenir*, and most of his writings were on economic and social questions. He emphasized the misery of the workers; condemned the exploitation of labor; supported the founding of workers' and masters' associations; He worked as a professor at the **University of Louvain**, and later became an editor of *L'Univers*. His influence on Frédéric Ozanam was considered great.

Revolution and Enlightenment philosophy, France is usually seen as the leading example of the unfolding of modernity and secularity. The emergence of *laïcité* at the end of the 19th century and the separation of Church and state in 1905 are often described as the hallmarks of a longer process that reached its peak at the beginning of the 20th century.

In fact, Dehon foresaw the consequences of laicization and the secularization long ago, which he underlined in his texts. Dehon had seen that the purpose of the revelation of the Sacred Heart was to denounce reformation and renaissance through a spiritual and social renewal. He felt that Europe was under crisis due to class antagonism, modern pauperism, and progress in literature etc. Hence, he proposes a triangular collaboration: **Religion, State, Elite**. He says: «Religion must sanctify the worker's labour; the State must protect it; and the Elite must assist in it».³³ For Dehon, Catholicism is the most perfect expression of religion that reconciles the worker or the working class against the seductive hopes of socialism. Dehon thrashes the socialist ideas that do no good for the individual workers, instead, he proposes a collaboration between the Church and the State for the common welfare of the working class: keep the Sunday holy so that the workers may practice their religion; protect children from premature exhaustion, protect mothers from labour, set limits on the hours of work beyond which employers would be charged with abuse.

2.8 Social Reign of the Sacred Heart

In connection with the spirituality of Sacred Heart, which is contextualized in the socio-political scenario of France, it is significant to study and analyse the term «Social» in Dehon's writings. **Jean-Jacques Flammang**³⁴, studying about Dehon's involvement in the Social Question, presents the Dehonian Spirituality in terms of «Love and Reparation». Flammang argues that the term «Reparation» seemed to have been misunderstood and misinterpreted in connection with the social meaning of the term, as commitment to the poor and the oppressed. Flammang underlines: «this aspect is absent from the Dehonian view, for

³³ Cfr. *Le Règne* 1889/5, 2

³⁴ Cfr. **Jean-Jacques Flammang** is a member of the Province of Francophone Europe. Born in 1956 in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, he entered the novitiate of the Priests of the Sacred Heart after having obtained a degree in Philosophy at the Catholic University of Louvain (1976-1980). He was ordained a priest in 1986. He held various responsibilities in the Province as Provincial Superior; Director of "Heimat und Mission"; Professor of religion at *Fieldgen*, in Luxembourg, and a chaplain of the Luxembourg Association of Catholic Universities.

whom, the word 'social' does not have the sense of militant commitment but indicates rather a 'political' or 'community' sense». ³⁵

In the light of the political or the community sense of the term «social», the Social Reign of the Sacred Heart, an anthem of Paray-Le-Monial, which Dehon embraced resounds in the entirety of his life. Albeit Dehon's concept of the *Social Reign of the Sacred Heart* merges personal devotion with action for social justice, aiming to bring Christ's love into all areas of life, including economic and political structures, he taught that reparation must extend beyond prayer to serving the poor, workers, and marginalized communities. He interpreted *Adveniat Regnum Tuum* from the Lord's Prayer as a *Call to Action* here and now, which he termed the *Social Reign of the Sacred Heart*. He calls for a social action, particularly, the clergy. ³⁶ He aimed at activating the young clerical generation to respond to the needy and the weaker sections i.e. the working class of his time.

Through his writings, Dehon, awakens and convokes the young minds of his generation. For Dehon, social chaos was really a sign of deeper spiritual struggles. He believed that economic injustice, class conflicts, and exploitation grow from selfishness and turning away from God's love. So, true social renewal depends on both changing hearts and reforming structures. This powerful combination of spirituality and social action is one of his most unique contributions.

3. Dehon Today

These texts reflect a critical period in the life of Leo Dehon, specifically during the mid-1890s, when he was deeply engaged in formulating and promoting Christian social doctrine. These writings demonstrate Dehon's direct participation in shaping and disseminating Catholic responses to modern social crises through structured teachings and pastoral strategies. They also reflect his reaction to contemporary ideological challenges, especially socialism, by reasserting the relevance of Catholic social teaching as articulated in Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*.

³⁵ DEH2002-44-EN

³⁶ REV 8031056/1-4 (Catholic Action: Old Substance, New Forms, 1898, p. 1-4)

Although Dehon's works were written in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, his ideas remain incredibly relevant today, especially when it comes to addressing pressing social issues such as economic inequality, consumerism, political division, environmental problems, and the erosion of human dignity. His approach blends spirituality, justice, and social reform—showing us that devotion to the Sacred Heart should inspire real action to transform society. Dehon's articles reveal a striking prophetic quality, insofar as these nineteenth-century texts illuminate key issues, challenges, and anxieties of the twenty-first century. Although Dehon addressed a social and ecclesial context shaped by industrial capitalism and post-revolutionary secularism, his theological diagnosis transcends its original historical setting and stands as beacon for today's socio-political-ecclesial scenario.

3.1 Reading Dehon now

The texts (1889-1903) of Dehon embark beyond time and context leaving some initial impressions. They express repeated alarm over what Dehon witnessed as a loss of moral and religious order. They emphasize social problems such as depopulation, crime, poverty, and industrial unrest, which result in the rejection of Christ's social reign and the erosion of Christian influence. On the other hand, some texts reflect the prejudices of the time, such as anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic rhetoric, which Dehon does not appear to challenge and may reflect traditional Church attitudes.

Hence, Dehon proposes a return to Church teachings, especially those of Pope Leo XIII, as the only viable solution to the crises of the time. He was clear and certain about his ideologies and position; thus, he strongly criticized socialism, liberalism, secularism, and rationalism as destructive and incompatible with religious and social stability. Moreover, he urged his contemporaries to practical and intellectual engagements in promoting Gospel values i.e., Christian Social Principles.

3.1 Relevance of Dehon's Text in our Context

The writings of Dehon demonstrate a clarity of reasoning that transcends their historical context. Dehon employs a methodical approach that moves from diagnosis to remedy, enabling readers to grasp both the problem and its proposed solution. His arguments are grounded in concrete historical data, such as demographic statistics and social indicators, which provide an empirical foundation for his theological reflections. This integration of fact and

interpretation mirrors contemporary interdisciplinary approaches in theology and social sciences. As a result, modern readers can follow his reasoning without excessive reliance on historical background knowledge. The logical progression of ideas reduces the distance between the nineteenth century and the present. Consequently, the text remains accessible despite temporal and cultural shifts.

Furthermore, the text addresses universal human experiences that remain intelligible across generations. Dehon's concern for justice, peace, and human dignity speaks to fundamental aspirations that continue to shape contemporary ethical discourse. His evocative descriptions of exploited workers, exemplified in his reference to the exhaustion and despair of the overworked poor, resonate strongly with modern readers. These images find parallels in present-day discussions on burnout, precarity, and social exclusion. The emotional and moral appeal of such narratives bridges historical distance. By focusing on the lived experience of suffering, Dehon avoids abstract moralism. Instead, he situates theology within concrete human realities. This anthropological sensitivity enhances the text's intelligibility. It allows readers today to recognize their own social contexts within his analysis.

The continued relevance of the text is also evident in the practicality of the solutions Dehon proposes. Rather than limiting himself to theoretical critiques, he advances concrete socio-economic models. His advocacy of «participation in profits» reflects an early vision of inclusive economic practices. This proposal anticipates contemporary discussions on corporate social responsibility and stakeholder-oriented business models. Modern readers familiar with ethical economics can readily engage with his arguments. Dehon's insists that workers be treated as partners rather than «mere instruments» challenges purely utilitarian views of labour. This perspective aligns with current human-centered economic theories. The practical orientation of his proposals enhances comprehension and applicability. Thus, the text speaks not only to moral ideals but also to actionable social reforms.

At a deeper level, the theological dimension of the text contributes significantly to its enduring intelligibility. Dehon's *Spirituality of the Sacred Heart of Jesus* provides an integrating framework for social engagement. He presents Sacred Heart as the unifying principle of social charity, grounding action in contemplation. This theological vision offers coherence to social critiques. For believers, it articulates a spirituality that links inner conversion with external transformation. His emphasis on sacrifice counters modern tendencies toward individualism and self-preservation. In this sense, his theology addresses contemporary

crisis of meaning and mental health. The notion of a «frightening void» caused by the absence of sacrificial love remains psychologically and spiritually perceptive. As such, the theological depth of the text continues to speak to modern existential concerns.

The text is not a relic confined to its historical moment but a living critique of modernity. Its continued intelligibility lies in its diagnosis of a social malady that has intensified over time. Dehon identifies the separation of economics and politics from moral and spiritual foundations as a core problem. This separation remains a defining characteristic of many contemporary societies. The *clarity of his method*, the *universality of his themes*, and the *concreteness of his proposals* ensure accessibility for today's readers. His theological vision offers a coherent interpretive lens rather than an antiquated worldview. The text challenges modern assumptions without alienating the reader. Therefore, it remains both understandable and compelling for the twenty-first-century audience.

3.2 Ideological Shift of Questions and Challenges Then & Now

The questions raised by Dehon remain highly pertinent in the twenty-first century because they probe the structural and spiritual foundations of social instability rather than merely addressing its surface manifestations. Dehon does not limit his inquiry to political or economic dysfunctions, but situates them within a broader theological horizon.

He asks whether a society can endure when God is systematically excluded from legislation, culture, and public life through what he terms «laicization» or «social atheism». In an age marked by moral relativism, ideological polarization, and the erosion of shared ethical frameworks, this question retains striking relevance. Dehon's concern suggests that human laws, when detached from a transcendent moral foundation, risk losing their capacity to foster justice and social cohesion. Thus, his inquiry challenges contemporary societies to reconsider the spiritual presuppositions underlying their political and legal systems.

Dehon continues to challenge contemporary society by functioning as a rigorous diagnostic framework for social and spiritual illness. Dehon insists that many social crises cannot be adequately understood without acknowledging their spiritual roots. He critiques what may be termed «social infidelity», namely the tendency of societies to pursue secular success while neglecting transcendence and moral responsibility. In his view, the sacrifice of family life, moral formation, and interior meaning for the sake of prestige or economic gain results in the loss of genuine human flourishing. This challenge remains acute in an age marked by

consumerism, performance-driven identities, and the erosion of domestic and communal bonds. Dehon thus confronts modern societies with the question of what constitutes authentic progress and true life.

Dehon's thought also challenges the apathy and passivity of believers in the face of social injustice. While deeply committed to ecclesial obedience, he rejected any form of resignation that would render Christians mere spectators of social degradation. He called the faithful to move beyond nostalgic regret and moral lamentation toward active «social engagement». This engagement included intellectual formation, responsible use of the press, and the creation of associations committed to social reform. Dehon's challenge remains relevant for contemporary Christians who may feel overwhelmed by global crises or retreat into private spirituality. His vision demands a faith that is socially embodied and historically responsible. In this way, he challenges the Church to integrate contemplation with concrete action.

A second set of Dehon's questions concerns the paradoxical human cost of modern progress. He wonders why an era celebrated for technological advancement and material prosperity simultaneously produces demographic decline, youth delinquency, and widespread existential emptiness. For Dehon, it results not in accidental failures but symptoms of a deeper moral and spiritual disorder. Progress, when absolutized, can generate pauperization, social fragmentation, and the weakening of family life. This diagnosis resonates with contemporary anxieties surrounding «demographic winters», social loneliness, and crises of meaning. Dehon's theological logic implies that authentic progress must be measured not only by economic growth but by its capacity to sustain human relationships and moral responsibility. His questions thus continue to illuminate the ambivalence of modernity in the twenty-first century.

Dehon's interrogation of the conflict between capital and labour remains acutely relevant in today's global economy. He challenges the justice of economic systems driven by unrestrained competition and usury that reduce the human person to a commodity. His critique targets a distribution of wealth in which capital secures disproportionate gains while workers endure persistent insecurity and poverty. This question anticipates contemporary debates on inequality, precarious labour, and the concentration of economic power. Dehon's theological concern lies in the violation of human dignity when economic structures prioritize profit over the person. By framing labour as a moral and relational reality rather than a mere economic

input, his questions continue to confront modern societies with their ethical responsibilities. Consequently, Dehon's inquiries retain enduring pertinence as a moral compass for today.

Finally, Dehon's critique of economic systems continues to confront modern assumptions about market absolutism. He rejects any form of «economic Darwinism» that reduces human relationships to competition governed solely by supply and demand. For Dehon, such systems perpetuate structural conflict and undermine social friendship. He challenges societies to move from class antagonism toward relations grounded in justice, solidarity, and shared prosperity. This challenge implies both intellectual rigor and practical commitment, what Dehon describes as being simultaneously «doctors and nurses of society». His thought thus calls for the systematic study of social problems alongside the concrete practice of charity at the local level. In this dual demand, Dehon continues to provoke ethical responsibility and theological discernment in the twenty-first century.

3.3 Reading Dehon in the 21st Century

The relevance and applicability of the answers proposed by Dehon lie in their integration of structural reform and spiritual renewal. Dehon did not offer solutions that were merely devotional or abstract, but articulated concrete responses to social injustices. His proposals emerge from a «theological anthropology» that places the dignity of the human person at the center of economic and social life. By linking moral theology with socio-economic analysis, he anticipated later developments in Catholic social teaching. This integration allows his answers to be reinterpreted and applied within contemporary ethical debates. Consequently, Dehon's thought continues to provide a coherent framework for addressing modern social challenges.

One of Dehon's most significant and forward-looking answers is his proposal for «profit participation» as the future of remuneration. He argued that the wage system should not be regarded as the definitive or final form of compensation, particularly when it perpetuates inequality. Instead, he envisioned an association of capital and labour in which workers become genuine partners in the prosperity of the enterprise. This model directly resonates with twenty-first-century discussions on stakeholder capitalism, employee ownership, and cooperative economic structures. Dehon's proposal reflects a theological conviction that economic relations must express solidarity rather than domination. By redefining labour relations in participatory

terms, his answer offers a viable ethical alternative to purely profit-driven models. Thus, his economic vision remains both relevant and adaptable to contemporary contexts.

At the deepest level, Dehon's ultimate answer lies in his concept of the Social Reign of the Sacred Heart, understood as the reign of charity rather than political theocracy. He maintained that social transformation cannot be sustained by legal mechanisms alone, but requires an interior conversion rooted in love. The Sacred Heart functions as the theological symbol of a social order animated by compassion, self-giving, and justice. Dehon believed that only a "flood of social charity" could serve as the unifying force for a fractured society. This vision challenges the technocratic and bureaucratic tendencies of modern governance. By re-centering social action on the "heart" rather than mere efficiency, his answer remains a profound critique and corrective for the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

Dehon pivoted from a life of academic privilege to working among factory workers and the poor; from the life of a diocesan clergy to a religious priest; from being a religious priest to a social reformer; from the life of a reformer to a social activist, a prophetic voice, a voice for the voiceless of the working class in France. He believed in taking the church out of the building and into the world, responding to social inequities by following his impetus, a deep sense of charity towards the society.

This underscores the importance of reading the text and the opportunity it offers to understand Dehon from his own thoughts scribbled in his texts. His thoughts continue to inspire and his legacy lives on globally through various pastoral and social ministries of his disciples. His on-going mission continues to respond to the needy and the lower classes of society seeking justice and human dignity. Dehon lives not only when we read his texts but in the spiritual ministerial activities of Dehonians who concretize his ideas and principles in the 21st century.