

**The presence of Dehon as an ideal founder and the construction
of the faithful disciples in NQT 35 to 45**

***A narratological, historical, and theological analysis of Léon Dehon's
Notes Quotidiennes (1913–1925)***

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1. Introduction

1.1. In what sense can we speak about NQT as a spiritual journal?

The spiritual journal, as a literary and devotional genre, functions as a profound mechanism for the construction of religious and institutional identity, particularly when authored by the founder of a religious institute. As a genre, the spiritual journal stands between confession and chronicle. Unlike a memoir composed retrospectively, the diary records events in temporal immediacy. Yet in the case of a founder, such writing is never neutral. It becomes an instrument of formation.

The *Notes Quotidiennes* (NQT) of Léon-Gustave Dehon function as a complex spiritual journal that transcends simple diary-keeping. In this context, the journal acts simultaneously as a “spiritual discipline” designed to chart inner progress, maintain accountability toward divine goals, and perform what may be termed a “textualization of the author”: a process whereby the life lived is converted into a narrative of grace, and the historical individual is gradually shaped into an exemplary figure for those who will read him after his death. It is, at the same time, a genre of “archive,” in which Dehon preserves diverse materials—retreat summaries, meditations, biblical commentaries, theological reading notes, geopolitical analyses, and obituaries of his collaborators—so as to validate his personal and institutional experience.

The writing process is not incidental to the spiritual life it describes: it is itself a constitutive act of that life, a daily performance of accountability before God and the community that will inherit his legacy. The NQT function as a “Spiritual Directory” that teaches

the reader that all external apostolic functions bear fruit only in proportion to one's union with God—a conviction that gives the entire sequence its distinctive pedagogical character.

A characteristic feature of the NQT's literary architecture is the systematic alternation between administrative record-keeping and high mystical elevation: a typical sequence might document a funeral, pivot to an analytical list of mystical authorities on divine union, and return to a report on mission finances. This “chapter style of juxtaposition” serves to sanctify the mundane, demonstrating that no dimension of experience falls outside the providential order and making mystical elevation seem organically continuous with ordinary life. The NQT does not merely document grace; it interprets it. It frames illness, war, financial anxieties, and ecclesial tensions as moments within a providential narrative. The daily entries—meditations, retreat notes, summaries of theological readings, records of train journeys, papal audiences, and wartime deprivations—create what may be called an “archive of grace.” This archival style lends authenticity: the reader encounters not a systematized treatise but a lived theology. Through repetition, cross-referencing, and citation of spiritual authorities, Dehon shapes a coherent vision: union with the Heart of Christ, reparation for sin, and the Social Reign of Christ as interpretive key to modern history.

Thus, NQT functions as a spiritual journal in the classical ascetical sense, yet also as a pedagogical and institutional document oriented toward the future of the SCJ.

1.2. Justification for the choice of the volumes NQT 35-45

The selection of Cahiers 35 through 45 is not arbitrary. These eleven notebooks document the final and perhaps richest period of Dehon's life: cover the final fifteen years of Dehon's life from his return to Europe after a circumnavigation of the world (2 March 1911) to the last entries completed weeks before his death in August 1925, representing his “full maturity” and the definitive synthesis of his spiritual and institutional legacy.

They document a series of decisive thresholds: the return from his world journey and the audience granted by Pius X (April 1911); the commemoration of his seventieth birthday and the dispatch of the Souvenirs circular as a spiritual testament (March 1912); the outbreak of the Great War and the German occupation of Saint-Quentin (August 1914); the forced exile to Enghien and Brussels in Belgium (March 1917); the fiftieth anniversary of his priesthood in 1918; the post-war reconstruction of the Congregation's institutions; and, finally, the approval

of the Constitutions by Pius XI in 1923 — an event Dehon regarded as the completion of his “great lifework”.

At the opening of Cahier 35, Dehon establishes a tone of terminal awareness, noting that health setbacks make him conscious that his time is short. This awareness sharpens the pedagogical intentionality of the writing: every entry is, in some sense, a message to the disciples who will survive him—a model of how to read history, how to interpret suffering, and how to sustain the interior life in conditions of institutional adversity.

1.3. Analysis of the complex author-reader relationship in NQT 35-45

To analyze NQT 35–45 with the precision they deserve, it is essential to establish the theoretical boundaries articulated by Wayne C. Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Booth distinguishes between two levels of authorial presence:

- The **historical or “real author”**, the narrator (the “I” of the text): The *historical Léon Dehon* was a man of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: a cleric who experienced the 1918 influenza epidemic, the physical discomforts of European rail travel in wartime, and the inevitable infirmities of advanced age. The *narrator* of the NQT is the “I” who meticulously records itineraries—Brussels, Etterbeek, Arlon, Rome—alongside financial anxieties and missionary progress reports.
- The **“implied author”**, a literary “second self” or “ideal, created version” of the writer, that does not fully coincide with the historical Dehon, but is the result of a series of narrative, theological, and spiritual choices. This implied author: selects, orders, and interprets the facts; decides what tone to adopt (mystical, administrative, political, penitential); constructs an image of himself as founder, victim, spiritual father, and witness to history; and guides the reader toward a sacramental reading of reality. Thus, the *implied* is the organizing intelligence inferred by the reader who decides that a delayed train in Bâle is not merely an inconvenience but a significant moment in a spiritual “exodus,” and that the administrative burden of fundraising constitutes a “daily sacrifice for the reign of the Sacred Heart.” In the terms of later narratology, this implied author functions as a “hypostasis of the work’s structure”—a conceptual and stylistic center that gives coherence to a mass of apparently miscellaneous material and acts as the “consciousness of the work”. This implied author is not identical to the historical Dehon who managed bank accounts or traveled by train, but is rather a “superior

version” of the self who interprets every mundane act through a providential filter. By choosing the diary genre, Dehon creates a text that conveys “diaristic urgency” and apparent spontaneity, suggesting that the reader is being granted access to the author’s most intimate spiritual movements without the retrospective shaping of a formal memoir. This sense of unfiltered authenticity is, of course, a literary construction: the implied author makes deliberate choices about what to record, how to frame it, and what weight to assign it. The construction is effective precisely because it does not declare itself. He presents himself as perpetually in a state of “seeking and waiting”—a disposition of active receptivity toward God’s action that transforms even administrative frustration into a form of spiritual discipline. His strategy of “systemic subjectivity” ensures that no entry in the NQT is merely factual: every observation is simultaneously a spiritual interpretation.

Parallel to the implied author, the text creates a “**mock reader**”—a concept defined by Walker Gibson and developed by Jane P. Tompkins as the quasi-persona whose mask the actual reader must assume in order to inhabit fully the values and worldviews encoded in the text. It is a model reader who must adopt a spiritual mask and must accept the spiritual pact proposed by the implied to enter the world of the diary. In NQT 35–45, this ideal reader: shares the author’s providentialist vision; accepts the interpretation of secularism as spiritual aggression; recognizes the divine legitimacy of the SCJ Work; and allows himself to be formed in the spirituality of reparation. In other words, this mock reader is a “pious soul,” a member of the Congregation of the Priests of the Sacred Heart (SCJ), who is expected to share the linguistic, axiological, and spiritual codes of the implied author: interpreting the First World War as divine retribution for European secularism, acknowledging the “divine foundations” of the SCJ Work, and aspiring to a life of mystical union with the Heart of Christ. In this sense, the relationship between the implied author and the mock reader is therefore not merely communicative but formative: Dehon does not write to inform but to construct a certain kind of disciple. Thus, NQT 35–45 are not merely a diary: they are a spiritual conversation between a founder who knows he is nearing the end of his life and a reader who must continue his mission.

Finally, one could stipulate the presence of a second level of reading: that of the “**today’s reader**”. This reader may or may not be a contemporary of Father Dehon, as is our case, since we read him a century later.

The relationship between these three levels (“real”, “implied” and “today’s reader”) in these notebooks is extraordinarily sophisticated. In the following points and in this order, we

will dedicate ourselves to briefly describing the “implied”, the “mock reader” and the meaning for the “real reader” in our day that we find in NQT 35-45.

2. The implied authorial presence in NQT 35-45

The implied authorial presence of NQT 35–45 is organized around several master concepts whose interaction defines the spiritual world of the notebooks: union with God, victimhood, social concern and action, foundation, history of salvation, aging, friends, ... We will now briefly describe them.

2.1. The multiple aspects of a life of union and victimhood

With respect to the first, the implied author argues consistently that union with God through passive, receptive prayer is not an extraordinary charism reserved for the spiritual elite but the “normal crowning of prayer and perfection” available to every committed Christian. In Cahier 35, the author poses the rhetorical question: “How could I not desire with the most ardent desire this union with God?”—and this question is addressed as much to the mock reader as to himself. He establishes that mystical union is available to all who persevere in prayer and abandon themselves to Providence, and he justifies even his appreciation of art and beauty by arguing that wherever something “speaks to the soul and awakens faith,” it constitutes a legitimate path to the divine. The implied author weaves his physical decline into this spiritual narrative with deliberate purpose, presenting his health failures not as evidence of weakness but as “benevolent warnings from Providence” and as the fulfilment of his 1878 vow to be a victim soul. His illnesses—vomiting blood, enduring what he describes as “Siberian” cold—are presented not as obstacles to the spiritual life but as its bodily confirmation: a literal continuation of the reparative mission he had undertaken four decades earlier.

With respect to victimhood, the implied author’s presentation undergoes a significant theological evolution across the fifteen years of NQT 35–45. In the earlier cahiers, victimhood is conceived primarily in terms of justice and expiatory satisfaction: the victim offers his suffering to compensate for the debt owed to divine justice by a sinful world. This is visible in the wartime entries, where Dehon interprets the occupation and devastation of Saint-Quentin in providentialist terms: in October 1915, after thirteen months of occupation, he writes that the

war continues “implacable” because “*l’expiation n’est pas encore suffisante*”¹, and that if there is to be peace, it will require “*beaucoup de victimes, beaucoup de sang*”.² This language of divine justice and expiatory “vengeance” belongs to a spirituality of victims widely practiced in Dehon’s cultural milieu.

As the notebooks progress, however, and especially under the influence of St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus — who offered herself not to divine justice but to the “merciful love” of God — the emphasis shifts decisively toward love. Dehon notes explicitly that Thérèse “*ne s’offre pas en victime de justice*” but “*en victime ou en holocauste à l’amour miséricordieux de Jésus*”³, and he identifies this spirit with the SCJ formula “*Vie d’amour et d’immolation*”. This evolution transforms the dark imagery of sacrifice into the luminous imagery of total self-giving, and reframes the mock reader’s own suffering not as punishment endured but as love expressed.

A parallel influence comes from Élisabeth de la Trinité (1880–1906), whose sense of mission he deeply admired: for her, the vocation of the Carmelite was to be “*médiatrice avec Jésus Christ, lui être comme une humanité de surcroît en laquelle il puisse perpétuer sa vie de réparation, de sacrifice, de louange et d’adoration*”.⁴ Reading these two Carmelites alongside Charles Sauvé’s works on the “intimate God” supplies the framework for what Dehon later calls the “internal heaven” — a state of habitual interior union that subsists beneath all external activity.

2.2. The synthesis of interior life and social action

One of the most remarkable rhetorical achievements of the NQT 35–45 is the seamless integration of mystical depth and social engagement. The implied author presents himself as a *homo politicus* who envisions the Church as actively involved in the reordering of society while maintaining a strict spiritual center. He moves without apparent discontinuity from critiquing universal suffrage or analyzing “Masonic anticlericalism” to presenting extensive biblical meditations on Ecclesiasticus or summarizing mystical treatises on divine union. He has a

¹ NQT XXXIX/1915, 1–2.

² Cf. NQT XL/1917, 93; XLII/1918, 91. 101–104.

³ NQT XLV/1925, 54–55.

⁴ NQT XXXVI/1915, 46.

precise and passionate vision of the state of France: critiquing successive governments since 1880 for their anti-clerical legislation, identifying the “false friends” of the people—socialists and laicists—and offering the Sacred Heart as the only “true friend.” This fluidity is not intellectual confusion but a deliberate demonstration that for Dehon, the social apostolate is not an alternative to the interior life but its external expression.

Dehon’s social commitment was not a passing episode. As he himself acknowledged in a letter from Victor Berne of Lyon, his “ardente campagne sociale” lasted “*au moins dix ans, de 1893 à 1903*”⁵ — and this international period represented only the crown of a longer local engagement. In a remarkable retrospective vision composed in 1916, Dehon traced his social mission in full:

*“Je repasse dans ma mémoire toute ma participation à l’action sociale chrétienne. C’était une vocation, une mission providentielle. [...] En 1872, je fonde le Patronage, j’y ajoute successivement le Cercle, l’association des patrons chrétiens, une réunion d’études sociales. Je provoque de beaux congrès: à Notre-Dame-de-Liesse en 1875; à Saint-Quentin en 1876; à Soissons en 1878. [...] En 1897–1898–1899, conférences à Rome [...]. Dans tout cet apostolat je ne voyais que le relèvement des petits et des humbles, selon l’esprit de l’Évangile”*⁶.

This vision of social action as “relèvement des petits et des humbles” constitutes what Dehon called one of “the graces of my priesthood”. He considered the period since 1888 as the “période apostolique” for the Congregation⁷ — a bold claim that acknowledged a genuine evolution from a quasi-conventual model toward active external engagement.

The concept of “Reparation” itself undergoes a significant development, evolving from a primarily expiatory category into what may be described as an “ethic of reconstruction”: in the postwar context, reparation signifies not only expiation before God but the active restoration of the social fabric damaged by war, laicism, and the dissolution of traditional community bonds.

Dehon reiterates his “Social Christian Manual” and his “Social Catechism”—presenting these works not as political tracts but as “manuals of love” designed to elevate the masses and establish a “kingdom of justice and charity.” His appointment as Consultant to the Index is presented as a “certificate of doctrinal correctness” that should reassure the mock reader of his theological reliability in these matters.

⁵ NQT XLIV/1924, 111.

⁶ NQT XXXIX/1916, 109–114.

⁷ NQT XLIV/1922, 69.

The “Social Reign of the Sacred Heart” is not a theocratic political program but the natural overflow of a community whose interior life is organized around union with a Heart that loves the world⁸. By framing political resistance to laicism as a form of spiritual fidelity, Dehon empowers the reader to view himself as part of a cosmic battle for the restoration of the social order, transforming social anxieties into a clear religious mandate.

The strategies through which the implied author pursues this integration of interior life and social action are numerous and carefully layered. In NQT 36, he critiques the “impudent” Freemasons who claim to respect conscience while closing Christian schools—a direct address to the mock reader’s experience of persecution that creates a powerful “us versus them” dynamic. In the same period, he invites the mock reader to participate in the Amende Honorable for France: a formal liturgical act of national repentance for the state’s having “indignantly wounded” Christ through its impious laws. This strategy is particularly effective because it moves the mock reader from passive suffering to active agency. The appeal to the “ten just men” whose prayer can avert divine wrath suggests that even a single individual’s fidelity has national and ultimately cosmic significance. By connecting this act to the figure of Jeanne d’Arc and the tradition of a Christian France, the implied author offers the mock reader an authentically patriotic identity that does not require endorsing the Republic’s secularism. The distinction between “official France” and the “real France” that prays and sacrifices is perhaps the most politically astute narrative move in the NQT 35–45.

2.3. The search for divine legitimization of its own foundation

As Dehon approaches his 80th year, the notebooks increasingly take on the character of an institutional apologia—a systematic effort to establish the “divine origin” of the SCJ Work beyond reasonable doubt. He achieves this through a strategy of retrospective reframing: past institutional trials are presented not as evidence of failure but as necessary stages in a providential design. The 1883 suppression of the congregation by diocesan authority is recast as a “crucifixion”—the “Consummatum est” that precedes and guarantees a “resurrection.” The

⁸ However, the concept of the ‘Social Reign of the Sacred Heart’ has evolved. Initially, this concept had a theocratic dimension, because at that time the Dehonian model (ideal) of society was not pluralistic, but guided solely by Christian principles.

suffering of the congregation is interpreted as a divine seal of authenticity rather than a divine judgment of worthlessness.

In October 1924, reflecting on the anniversary of the death of Fr. Modeste — “*un de nos principaux conseillers et collaborateurs des commencements*”⁹ — Dehon offered one of his most comprehensive accounts of what he called the “*fondements divins de l’Œuvre*”,¹⁰ organized into seven series. The first, which “*suffirait à elle seule*”, is the sequence of ecclesiastical approvals: by the Bishop of Soissons in 1877; by the Holy See as a diocesan congregation in 1884; by the *Decretum laudis* of 25 February 1888; by the definitive approbation of the Institute in 1906; by the approval of the Constitutions in 1923; and by the papal brief of the same year praising Dehon’s zeal “*soit en excitant le peuple à professer la foi, soit en exerçant la charité, soit enfin en vous fatiguant dans la prédication et dans le soin d’écrire des livres*”. Dehon annotates with deep emotion: “*C’est bien l’œuvre de Dieu qui a été ainsi louée, encouragée et approuvée par son Église*”.¹¹

The second series, as Dehon recounts it, is “*la réponse que fit la Providence*” to his vow of victimhood made on 28 June 1878: loss of health; the sacrifice of *Sœur Marie de Jésus* to save his life; the loss of an inheritance of 800,000 francs through an unjust lawsuit; the fire at Collège SaintJean in 1881; anguish of soul; and the loss of honor in Saint-Quentin in 1882–1883. “*Le Père Rasset comparait mon état à celui de Job*”, he notes quietly.¹² Further series include the mystical action through *Sœur Ignace’s* “*vues d’oraison*” (1878–1882); the encouragements of elite souls such as Don Bosco, the Père Modeste, and the Mère Véronique; and the foundation of two congregations of Sisters sharing the same spirituality and thus confirming the charism from outside.

The following table synthesizes the principal signs of divine favor and the narrative framing through which the implied author presents them:

Key Sign of Divine Favor	Narrative Framing in NQT	Authorial Intent
The 1883 Suppression	“Consummatum est” — a necessary crucifixion	Legitimizing trials as prefiguration of resurrection

⁹ NQT XLIV/1924, 131.

¹⁰ NQT XLIV/1924, 131–138.

¹¹ NQT XLIV/1924, 132–134.

¹² Ibidem, 134–136.

Mystical Favors (1878)	Signs communicated through Sœur Ignace	Affirming that the Work's origin is divine, not merely human
Sacrifice of Sœur Marie de Jésus	A "victim soul" who confirms the congregation's charism	Providing supernatural validation for the SCJ vocation

Key Sign of Divine Favor	Narrative Framing in NQT	Authorial Intent
Papal Approbations	Decrees of 1888, 1906, 1923 as narrative milestones	Establishing authentic testimony of divine will in history
Vocation Summary	Special vocation: love and reparation	Providing a concise, transmissible formula for successors

The final approbation of the Constitutions by Pius XI in 1923 represents the "narrative climax" of this apologetic project: the moment at which the congregation's identity passes definitively from the personal charismatic authority of the founder to the legal-institutional authority of an approved text. The "legal-spiritual defense" is thereby complete, and the author can prepare his departure in peace, having secured the Work against the contingencies of his own mortality.

2.4. Reading history as the "history of salvation": theological interpretation of events

The implied author of NQT 35–45 does not engage with history as a neutral observer but as a "spiritual witness" whose fundamental interpretive principle is the theology of Providence. The Great War is not analyzed as a geopolitical accident or the product of systemic diplomatic failures but as a "punishment for Europe" and a "debt to divine justice"—specifically, the justice owed by cities and nations that had "exalted Voltaire and Renan" and legislated God out of public life. He constructs the war not merely as a divine punishment but, paradoxically, as a space of divine presence—an "idea of hell" that is also a "real-life Calvary," in which the blood of the fallen would "blossom in rich harvest" of spiritual renewal.

The progression of the wartime entries reveals the arc of this providentialist hermeneutic with particular clarity:

"Cette année s'ouvre dans des conditions bien dramatiques". January 1915¹³

¹³ NQT XXXVI/1915, 1.

“Voilà six mois que la ville est occupée [...]. Pas de correspondance ni de nouvelles du dehors. Les aliments deviennent rares, la viande manque et le pain gris est rationné. Patience! Puissent nos privations hâter le jour de la miséricorde”. March 1915¹⁴

“Voilà treize mois d’occupation. [...] La guerre se ranime plus terrible et plus implacable. L’expiation n’est pas encore suffisante”. October 1915¹⁵

On 12 March 1917, evacuation of the city became mandatory. *“C’est l’exil”*, wrote Dehon, *“après plusieurs jours de préparation pénible”*.¹⁶ Loaded with his bundle like everyone else, he departed for the concentration point at Enghien in Belgium, arriving exhausted and suffering. It was from Enghien that he could subsequently move to Brussels and gradually resume contact with his religious.

This providentialist hermeneutic extends to the geography of Dehon’s personal life. His move to Enghien is narrated as an “exile”; his departure from Brussels becomes an “exodus”; the ruins of Saint-Quentin are read as a “lesson” inscribed by God in the landscape of history. In this way, travel itself is elevated into sacred history, and the mock reader is summoned to see the “finger of God” even in the destruction of what the implied author calls the “berceau” of the Congregation. The strategy is highly effective: it moves the reader from a state of passive suffering under historical forces beyond his control to one of active interpretive agency—the agency of the spiritual witness who reads history as salvific script.

This theological interpretation of events also serves the mock reader’s specific ecclesial situation. For decades, French Catholics had been subjected to the accusation that their loyalty to Rome compromised their loyalty to France. The war offered a providential opportunity to refute this accusation: priests served as chaplains at the front; religious brothers served in the trenches; religious houses opened as hospitals. The courage of the clergy in wartime constituted, for Dehon, the definitive vindication of the “real France” against the slanders of the laicists—and the mock reader, by identifying with this narrative, discovered that his ecclesial fidelity was not a form of un-French privatism but the expression of the most authentic patriotism.

2.5. Personal evolution: the process of aging and idealization of the past

¹⁴ NQT XXXVII/1915, 1.

¹⁵ NQT XXXIX/1915, 1.

¹⁶ NQT XL/1917, 106.

Across the eleven notebooks of NQT 35–45, Dehon undergoes a traceable personal evolution that reflects both the natural process of aging and the deliberate spiritual program of a man preparing for death. By simplifying, the journals reveal a progressive shift in focalization: in the earlier cahiers (35–38), the implied author adopts a posture of “zero focalization”—an apparently omniscient witness who surveys the war from a position of external observation, cataloguing events, interpreting their significance, and providing the mock reader with a comprehensive account of a world in crisis. By the later cahiers (43–45), this external perspective has given way to an “internal focalization” in which the implied author’s attention is directed primarily toward his own mystical impressions, his relationships with “celestial friends,” and the preparation of his soul for the final passage.

Throughout this evolution, the implied author interprets his past through a lens of spiritual idealization, recognizing God’s blessings in every chapter of his life while adopting—with sincere theological conviction rather than mere rhetorical convention—the persona of the “worst of sinners” in need of mercy. This combination of gratitude and humility is not contradictory: it reflects the classical spiritual teaching, absorbed especially from St. Francis de Sales and the French School, that the deeper one’s union with God, the more keenly one perceives the distance between the creature and the Creator. He records his physical “atonement”—vomiting blood, enduring the cold of Siberian intensity—as a literal continuation of his reparative mission, not as evidence of neglected health but as the bodily inscription of his spiritual vocation.

The following table synthesizes the principal Dehon’s main dates, places, and attitudes in understanding his old age:

Cahier	Key Years	Geographic Focus	Dominant Authorial Posture
NQT 35–36	1913–1915	Saint-Quentin / Rome	Elder statesman entering terminal awareness
NQT 37–39	1915–1916	Saint-Quentin (Occupation)	Spiritual witness interpreting national punishment
NQT 40–41	1916–1917	Enghien / Brussels (Exile)	Theological arbiter building interior sanctuary
NQT 42–43	1918–1920	Paray-le-Monial / Rome	Institutional reconstructor and doctrinal consolidator
NQT 44–45	1921–1925	Rome / Brussels	Mystical participant preparing eschatological departure

2.6. External relationships: friends and the ecclesiastical hierarchy

Dehon weaves a complex and carefully modulated relational persona across NQT 35–45. His documented audiences with Popes Benedict XV and Pius XI are narrated not as personal triumphs but as “administrative sacrifices”—wearisome but necessary acts of institutional service undertaken for the good of the Work. His relationship with Benedict XV (Giacomo Della Chiesa) is particularly significant: the implied author invokes their “old friendship” and the Pope’s personal encouragement, establishing his high standing within the ecclesiastical hierarchy and countering the “pariah” narrative that anti-clerical France had constructed around religious orders. When he recounts that the Pope “tasted well” his project for an altar of the Sacred Heart at Saint Peter’s, this detail signals to the mock reader that the congregation’s charism has the highest possible institutional endorsement and is not a marginal obsession but a central concern of the universal Church. He also cherished Rome as his “seconde patrie”, having visited it almost every year for fifty-five years: “J’aime Rome”, he repeated, “qui est ma seconde patrie”.¹⁷

At the same time, Dehon builds an elaborate network of what he calls “celestial friends”—saints and departed collaborators whom he presents as the invisible community of solidarity that sustains the Work from beyond death. Among the earthly collaborators, he lists figures such as Harmel, Toniolo, and the Marquis de La Tour du Pin; among the celestial ones, Don Bosco, Louise Lateau, and Pius X. In NQT 43, he explicitly lists his “great friends” and his “saints,” creating a dual community—living and deceased—that presents the SCJ charism as embedded in a providential network far larger than any single institutional structure.

This strategy serves a profound rhetorical function: it assures that the congregation is not isolated in its trials but sustained by a cloud of witnesses whose intercession is efficacious. By presenting himself as a “Global Strategist” who manages missions in Finland, Java, and Cameroon while simultaneously receiving the prayers of the saints, the implied author constructs a persona that is simultaneously humble—dependent on supernatural assistance—and authoritative—part of the Church’s most distinguished spiritual tradition. The

¹⁷ NQT XLII/1918, 38.

Congregation is thereby presented as inhabiting both historical time and eschatological time: a dual citizenship that is the ultimate source of its spiritual resilience.

3. The Construction of the “mock reader” as a faithful disciple

3.1. Reader-Mediator: Dehon as reader and the results of his reading

One of the most significant roles the implied author performs in relation to the mock reader is that of “reader-mediator”: a figure who reads the spiritual tradition on behalf of the reader, distills it into what he presents as “invigorating nourishment,” and thereby forms the reader into a practitioner of *lectio divina* without requiring him to undertake the entire intellectual labor independently. During the years of wartime isolation in Saint-Quentin (1914–1917), when normal apostolic activity was impossible, Dehon filled his cahiers with sustained summaries of spiritual authors—Charles Sauvé’s *Jésus intime*, Barthélemy Froget’s *De l’habitation du Saint-Esprit*, the spiritual biography of Sœur Marie de la Providence—and organized these summaries into “categorical summaries” designed to serve as a practical *Directoire* for the active apostolic life.

The pedagogical function of Dehon’s mediation is not merely informational but formational. The “categorical summaries” he produces are not mere digests of theological content but carefully structured invitations to a particular mode of reading—a mode in which every text is approached as a potential disclosure of God’s action in the soul and in history. By demonstrating this mode of reading in practice across hundreds of daily entries, the implied author trains the mock reader in a hermeneutic of faith that is simultaneously intellectual and affective, rigorous and prayerful. The formation of the “faithful disciple” begins, in this sense, not with specific doctrinal content but with a way of reading—a disposition of attentive receptivity before the text and, through the text, before God.

The corpus of authorities through which the implied author mediates is extensive and carefully selected. To support his views on mystical union as the normal crowning of the Christian life, he cites a prestigious array of classical mystics: St. Bonaventure, St. Bernard, Richard and Hugh of Saint Victor, and St. John of the Cross. In the domain of the French School of Spirituality, the figures of Cardinal de Bérulle, Jean-Jacques Olier, and Louis Lallemant are decisive. For the practical life of prayer, Father Caussade and Lorenzo Scupoli supply the

vocabulary of abandonment and peace of soul. The following table summarizes the key spiritual authorities and their contributions to the mock reader's formation:

Spiritual Authority	Core Theme Emphasized	Function for the Mock Reader
Charles Sauvé	Intimate God; Action of Grace; St. Joseph	Theological validation of the “internal heaven” as reality
Louis Lallemant	Docility to the Holy Spirit	Framework for the SCJ as men of deep interior life
Father Caussade	Abandonment to Divine Providence	Reconciling active apostolic work with interior union
Lorenzo Scupoli	Peace of soul and spiritual combat	Remedy for post-war interior anxieties and spiritual dryness
Bossuet	Simplified oraison — “simple regard”	Democratizing mystical union across the entire congregation
St. John of the Cross	Dark Night and purification	Interpretive framework for institutional failures and trials

By aligning himself with the great tradition of the Church, the implied author convinces the mock reader that the SCJ charism is not a novelty but a faithful synthesis of established spiritual truths. In NQT 40, the analysis of the “Alphabet Primitif” and the critique of “Soldi's pantheism” further demonstrate an implied author capable of engaging the secular world on its own ground—history, linguistics, philosophy—and arriving at a Catholic conclusion. This intellectual versatility addresses the mock reader's concern about the “unstoppable juggernaut of positivism” by demonstrating that faith has nothing to fear from critical inquiry.

A genuine novelty was the work of the Dominican Barthélemy Froget, *De l'habitation du Saint Esprit dans les âmes justes*, which Dehon read and reread with passion. He loved and adored this divine presence, and in his journal he devoted thirty pages to a synthesis of the work (pages 63 to 93 of the manuscript). He concludes: “*Quelle consolation et quelle joie m'inspirerait cette pensée habituelle!*”¹⁸

The author who recurs most frequently in the 1915–1917 notebooks is the Sulpician Charles Sauvé, whose series of works — *Élévations sur les mystères de Jésus*, *Les mystères de*

¹⁸ NQT XXXVI/1915, 93.

la Passion, Dieu intime, Jésus intime, Marie intime, Le Sacré-Cœur intime — Dehon summarized across at least three cahiers. Sauvé's guiding principle, "*Tout méditer, tout voir en Jésus*", was in perfect accord with Dehon's own deepest inclination: "*chercher surtout le dedans de l'évangile, le dedans le plus intime, qui est l'amour*".¹⁹ The influence of Charles Sauvé, which Dehon returns to repeatedly in the formula "*Je relis Sauvé*," is decisive for the implied author's late-life spiritual vocabulary. Sauvé's works on "Divine Action" and the "intimate God" supply the theoretical framework for Dehon's focus on what he calls the "internal heaven"—a state of habitual interior union with God that subsists beneath and sustains all external activity. This concept, developed progressively across the later cahiers, represents the culmination of the implied author's spiritual journey and the supreme gift he offers to the mock reader: the assurance that such a state is not merely an exceptional mystical grace but the normal destination of a life of faithful prayer.

3.2. Narrative Power: from tragedy to redemption

Dehon uses a variety of sophisticated narrative strategies to transform historical setbacks into redemptive stories. The most fundamental of these is what might be called "journalistic realism in the service of spiritual interpretation": by meticulously documenting the "grey bread" and rationing of wartime occupation alongside prayers and meditations, Dehon establishes a bond of experiential solidarity with the mock reader while simultaneously demonstrating that the most abject material conditions can be inhabited with spiritual dignity. The implied author does not minimize suffering but refuses to allow it to have the last interpretive word.

The implied author also deploys the narrative power of his papal relationships with particular effectiveness. When he recounts how Benedict XV personally encouraged his project for the Sacred Heart and how Pius XI approved the Constitutions, he frames the ruins of his institutional houses as a "lesson"—a pedagogy inscribed by Providence in the material landscape—and fosters confidence that institutional and social restoration is inevitable through the "Social Reign" of the Sacred Heart. He frames the narrative arc of the congregation's history as an irrefutable demonstration that "the finger of God" writes straight with crooked lines: every

¹⁹ Charles Sauvé, *Marie intime*, édition 1930, p. 324.

apparent failure has disclosed itself, in retrospect, as preparation for a greater fruitfulness. Equally revealing is Dehon's attachment to the places of the Work's origin. In his last years he reflected with increasing intensity on the "berceau de l'Œuvre" — the house of the Sacred Heart in Saint-Quentin, from which the congregation had twice been expelled (1903–1905, and then definitively). In 1921 he wrote:

"Je repense beaucoup aux commencements de l'Œuvre. [...] La Providence a ses préférences géographiques. La Sainte Vierge a choisi La Salette et Lourdes. Le Sacré Cœur a préféré Parayle-Monial, Montmartre, Saint-Quentin... C'est la Providence qui a conduit la Chère Mère fondatrice à Saint-Quentin avec la Sœur Ignace, et moi j'ai abouti là aussi, malgré moi. Nous devons nous y rencontrer".²⁰

And when the city of Saint-Quentin obtained the expropriation of the Sacred Heart house, Dehon lamented: *"C'est le berceau de la Congrégation. Nous y avons beaucoup travaillé et beaucoup souffert. [...] C'est un crève-cœur, fiat! Tout Institut tient à ses origines, à son berceau".²¹*

3.3. Meaning of suffering: setbacks as divine favor

Dehon teaches the mock reader to view suffering through a "sacramental" lens—to read every setback as a potential disclosure of divine favor rather than a straightforward evidence of divine absence or displeasure. He models the "Fiat" as the ultimate response to setbacks, turning the "burden of fundraising," the Roman refusal of imprimaturs, and the dishonesty of "unserious bursars" into occasions for a "daily sacrifice for the reign of the Sacred Heart."

The sacramental interpretation of suffering is grounded also in Dehon's own interior life. On 5 March 1923, the feast of the Five Wounds, Sœur Ignace at prayer heard Our Lord say to her: *"Vous devez le chercher toujours dans la plaie de mon Cœur"*. Dehon responds immediately with full identification:

"Oui, c'est vraiment là que je veux vivre. Je m'unis au Cœur de Jésus pour adorer et aimer la sainte Trinité, pour réparer, pour prier. C'est là que je fais ma méditation, mon adoration et tous ces sursum corda que je voudrais encore plus assidus et plus fervents"²².

²⁰ NQT XLIV/1921, 9–11.

²¹ NQT XLV/1925, 4–5.

²² NQT XLIV/1923, 75.

This text introduces the climate that characterizes the spiritual life of Dehon's final years. This "democratization of the mystical" constitutes one of the most pastorally generous contributions of the NQT: the assurance that the summit of the spiritual life does not require exceptional circumstances or extraordinary gifts but is accessible to every member of the congregation, in every situation, at every moment.

3.4. Apostolic fruitfulness: active and passive attitudes

Drawing extensively from Louis Lallemant's *Doctrine spirituelle*, the implied author constructs an understanding of apostolic fruitfulness that is both demanding and consoling. Dehon wrote of it: "... un trésor. J'y trouve des lumières qui me satisfont pleinement sur l'oraison, la conduite du Saint Esprit, la vie intérieure, l'union avec Notre Seigneur, le Règne de Dieu en nous".²³ Lallemant's teaching that the spiritual life consists simply "*en deux choses: d'un côté dans les opérations de Dieu en l'âme, dans les lumières qui éclairent l'entendement, dans les inspirations qui touchent la volonté; et de l'autre, en la coopération de l'âme aux lumières et aux mouvements de la grâce*"²⁴ supplied the theoretical framework for Dehon's focus on what he calls the "internal heaven" — a state of habitual interior union that subsists beneath and sustains all external activity. The fundamental principle— "we will bear no fruit in our functions except in proportion to our union with God"—functions as both a standard and an invitation: it raises the bar for apostolic engagement while simultaneously identifying the only reliable path to genuine missionary effectiveness. This Lallemantian framework resolves the tension between the active and contemplative dimensions of the SCJ vocation not by privileging one over the other but by establishing a relationship of mutual constitution: the activity is the overflow of the contemplation, and the contemplation is what gives the activity its fruitfulness.

The fullest expression of this integration is found in the account Dehon gives of his prayer life in his final years. For the development of this life of union with God, he had adopted the practice of the "messe spirituelle":

²³ NQT XLIII/1919, 63.

²⁴ NQT XLIII/1919, 75–76.

“Que peut-on faire de mieux dans les moments d’adoration? Au ciel, c’est la messe perpétuelle. L’agneau est toujours immolé ou présenté avec les stigmates de l’immolation pour la gloire de Dieu, la joie du ciel, le salut des âmes”.

And he describes the substance of his *oraison* in Cahier 45:

“Je salue la sainte Trinité, mon Père et Créateur; le Verbe de Dieu devenu mon frère et mon Rédempteur; le Saint-Esprit devenu mon guide et mon consolateur. J’assiste à la grande messe perpétuelle du ciel: Jésus s’offrant à son Père, l’Agneau immolé dès le commencement; le Cœur de Jésus, victime d’amour pour la gloire de Dieu et le salut des hommes. [...] Je m’unis aux amis de Jésus: aux amis de Béthanie, aux amis du Calvaire, aux dévots de l’Eucharistie... Je m’unis à tous les fondateurs, aux saints du Sacré Cœur. La messe a aussi ses intentions: je prie pour l’Église et ses grands besoins actuels, pour l’union et le retour des hérétiques et schismatiques, pour les missions. Je prie pour la France et les nations chrétiennes, je prie pour l’Œuvre, pour mes parents et amis, pour moi-même et pour les défunts”²⁵.

This remarkable text reveals what Dehon himself called the “fond de mon oraison” — the irreducible interior core around which all his external activity was organized. The Trinitarian dimension is inseparable from the Eucharistic and cosmic dimensions: the personal relationship with Father, Son, and Spirit overflows into intercession for the whole Church, the whole world, and the entire community of the living and the dead.

Cahier 41 occupies a particularly significant place in the arc of the NQT 35–45. Written during the exile in Belgium, this notebook stages an extended theological meditation on the nature of oraison and contemplation that functions simultaneously as spiritual counsel and institutional identity formation. The implied author assumes the role of theological arbiter: by evaluating the principal methods of prayer in the Catholic tradition—the Saint-Sulpice method, the Ignatian method, and the Carmelite method—and finding each valuable but partial, he positions his own synthesis as their culminating integration. He is not an innovator but a restorer, not a revolutionary but a curator who has sifted the tradition to extract its perennial essence. The strategy transforms the implied author’s authority from the charismatic to the traditional—precisely the kind of authority that can survive the founder’s death.

3.5. Transition of authority: from charismatic founder to legal Constitutions

The final journals document a crucial and theologically significant shift in the nature of authority within the congregation. The 1923 approval of the Constitutions by Pius XI

²⁵ Résumé du Cahier 45/1925, 11–14.

represents the “narrative climax” of Dehon’s life and of the NQT 35–45 as a sequence: the moment at which the congregation’s identity passes definitively from the personal charismatic authority of the founder—centered on Dehon’s presence as the “ideal founder”—to the legal authority of an approved text, designed to guide the disciples long after the historical author’s death.

This transition is not experienced by the implied author as a loss but as a fulfilment. The Constitutions represent the successful textualization of the charismatic impulse: the conversion of a personal spiritual intuition into a transmissible institutional form that can survive and sustain itself independently of its originator. Through the NQT, Dehon provides his community with what amounts to a “spiritual testament” and a “legal-spiritual defense” of the SCJ charism—a document that not only transmits the spiritual substance of his founding vision but argues, with cumulative rhetorical force, for the divine authenticity of its origin.

From a historical perspective, the success of this transition is attested by the subsequent development of the congregation. The “flowering of vocations” and the rapid international expansion—into Java, Cameroon, South Africa, Finland, and beyond—during the years immediately following Dehon’s death in August 1925 indicate that the authorial strategy of the NQT achieved its intended effect. The reader had adopted the mask, internalized the values, and was prepared to continue the Work. The survival and internationalization of the SCJ congregation confirm that the movement from charismatic leadership to a text-based deposit of charism successfully transitioned the mission to a new generation—that the mock reader had, in the deepest sense, become the “faithful disciple” that Dehon sought to construct.

The post-war period provided specific historical validation for key elements of Dehon’s narrative. The press’s documentation of the clergy’s wartime service—the *Livre d’Or* that recorded the chaplains and brothers who served alongside their compatriots—constituted an external corroboration of the implied author’s account of the “real France” that prays and sacrifices. The mock reader’s concerns about the Church’s “pariah” status under the Third Republic were answered, at least in part, by the public recognition of the clergy’s heroism—a recognition that strengthened the “certainty in confidence” that the NQT had preached. Dehon’s focus on the “Social Reign” and on “Reparation” resonated deeply with twentieth-century French Catholic laypeople, attracting many believers to participate in the congregation’s charism through lay associations like *Adveniat Regnum Tuum*, whose very name echoes the implied author’s defining hope. The NQT 35–45 had accomplished what they set out to

accomplish: they had transformed the charismatic authority of a dying founder into a portable, transmissible, and institutionally durable charter for discipleship.

4. Being today's reader...

4.1. Modern challenges: confronting “soft-secularism”

Today's reader of NQT 35–45 inhabits a cultural situation that is both analogous and crucially different from the one Dehon addressed. The “hard” or “assertive” laicism of the Third Republic— which expelled religious orders, laicized public institutions by legislative force, and constructed a militantly anti-clerical public culture—has in most Western contexts given way to what sociologists of religion have called “soft-secularism” or “procedural secularism”: a cultural configuration that tolerates religion as a source of private moral formation and personal meaning while systematically marginalizing religious voices from public discourse and policy deliberation. Unlike the hard laicism of Dehon's time, which produced dramatic confrontations that could be narrativized as forms of the “vocation of Job” and “institutional crucifixion,” this softer secularism operates through gradual exclusion rather than dramatic expulsion—rendering the religious believer present but culturally irrelevant—invited to practice his faith privately while accepting that it has no legitimate claim on the shared public life.

This softer form of secularism is in some respects more difficult to engage precisely because it does not produce the martyrological drama that gives the NQT their rhetorical energy. However, it poses the same fundamental challenge: the claim that religious truth is a merely private matter without legitimate bearing on the shared life of society. Reading Dehon in this context requires an effort of historical imagination—recognizing the structural continuity between the experience of marginalization he describes and the experience of procedural exclusion that characterizes the contemporary situation—while also acknowledging the differences that make direct historical analogy inadequate.

4.2. Relevance of concepts of spiritual life: union, victimhood, and reparation today

Historical analysis notes a significant “break in the reception” of Dehonian concepts around 1973, after which the spiritual vocabulary of the NQT began to require systematic

translation for new generations of readers. Modern readers find concepts like “victimhood” or “oblation” culturally unintelligible in their original register and often re-translate them into terms like “reconciliation,” “witness,” “disponibility,” or “solidarity with the marginalized.” These re-translations represent not a betrayal of the NQT’s spiritual substance but a necessary act of hermeneutical fidelity: an acknowledgment that the substance must find new cultural forms in order to remain alive in communities whose formation is irreversibly shaped by post-conciliar and post-modern horizons.

The concept of mystical union, by contrast, may speak more directly to the contemporary reader than it did to many of Dehon’s original audience—particularly in a context where the interior life is increasingly colonized by digital distraction and institutional urgency, and where the hunger for contemplative depth is widely acknowledged even outside explicitly religious communities. Dehon’s insistence that union with God is compatible with administrative burden, physical suffering, and institutional adversity speaks directly to religious communities navigating the experience of demographic decline and institutional diminishment.

Reparation, understood not as expiatory satisfaction of divine justice but as active commitment to the repair of broken relationships—between persons, between communities, between humanity and creation—recovers the structural insight of Dehon’s theology while situating it in a framework of justice and solidarity more readily accessible to the contemporary moral imagination. His vision of the “Social Reign” similarly remains relevant as a call for “social justice” and a “theology of bridges” between faith and society—between the interior life and the transformation of structures. The SCJ charism, read in this key, offers resources for engaging the ecological crisis, the challenge of global migration, and the cultural consequences of technological disruption that Dehon could not have anticipated but that his fundamental intuitions about the Heart of Christ address at the level of principle.

4.3. Openness: reading the “signs of the time”

Perhaps the most enduring and transferable feature of the implied author’s posture in NQT 35–45 is not any specific theological conclusion but the methodological disposition from which those conclusions are drawn: a spirit of “unlimited zeal” and openness to everything human, combined with the capacity to read the signs of the times through the grammar of the Gospel. Dehon urges his readers—by example as much as by exhortation—to “reject

attachments to the past” and enter the “new reality” with joy. For the implied author, creative fidelity to the charism requires not the repetition of past formulas but the application of enduring principles to genuinely new situations, with the willingness to be surprised by where that application leads.

For today’s reader, this entails rethinking the mission in light of challenges that Dehon’s generation could not have foreseen: the implications of artificial intelligence for human dignity and labor; the ecological crisis as a form of structural injustice requiring reparation; the displacement of millions of people across national borders as a contemporary form of the “vocation of exile” that Dehon experienced in his own person. These challenges are not external to the Dehonian charism but continuous with the concerns that drove the NQT 35–45: the desire to read history as salvific script, to sustain the interior life in conditions of radical uncertainty, and to remain, in Dehon’s own phrase, “rooted in the active presence of the love of Christ.”

Reading the NQT today ultimately requires what might be called a hermeneutics of critical charity: the willingness to engage the text’s limitations without reducing it to those limitations, and the capacity to distinguish between the cultural container and the spiritual wine it carries. The implied author of NQT 35–45 models, above all, a way of inhabiting history theologically—a way that transforms the “chaos of day-to-day sensation” into a meaningful world in which discipleship is both possible and urgent. As Dehon closes *Cahier 45* in the final months before his death, the implied author and the mock reader are joined in a quiet eschatological communion, looking toward a “Kingdom of Love” that the historical crises of 1913–1925 could not destroy and that no subsequent crisis can finally defeat. The NQT are not merely a record of a life: they are a standing invitation to read one’s own life—and one’s own historical moment—in the light of the Heart from which all things come and to which all things return.

The sustainability of this invitation across a century of radical historical change is itself the most eloquent testimony to the achievement of the implied author. What Dehon constructed in NQT 35–45 was not a theology bound to a particular social configuration—that of pre-conciliar French Catholicism in the Third Republic—but a grammar of Christian experience capable of generating new sentences in response to situations he could not have anticipated. The faithful disciple whom the implied author sought to construct was never intended to be a replica of the original mock reader but a disciple who had internalized the same disposition: the

willingness to read one's own historical moment with the same combination of unflinching realism and unshakeable hope that characterizes the best pages of the NQT. In this sense, the text's work is never finished, and its implied author never fully departs. He remains available to every reader willing to put on the mask—and to discover, in doing so, not a constraint but a liberation.

4.4. The SCJ identity today: between fidelity and creative renewal

Perhaps the most generative tension transmitted by the NQT for contemporary SCJ readers is the tension between fidelity to the founder's charism and creative response to new historical situations. Dehon himself modeled this creative fidelity explicitly: his repeated gesture of re-reading—"Je relis Sauvé," "Je relis Lallemand"—was not conservative repetition but dynamic retrieval. He was not a museum curator of tradition but a spiritual chef who combined traditional ingredients in response to the specific hungers of his time. The implied author's willingness to engage with geopolitical crisis, theological controversy, and institutional adversity—bringing to each the full resources of the interior life—models a posture of engaged availability that transcends its historical context.

Today's SCJ community inherits this creative fidelity as a constitutive feature of its charism. The task is not to reproduce Dehon's nineteenth-century social analysis or his providentialist reading of world events but to inhabit the same depth of engagement: to be, as Dehon was, simultaneously men of deep interior prayer and attentive readers of the signs of the times. The NQT 35–45 model this integration not as a solved problem but as a permanent vocation—the vocation of the "official scribe" who records, with equal fidelity, both the movements of God in the soul and the movements of God in history, and who trusts that these two records, taken together, constitute the fullest available account of reality.

5. Conclusion: toward a hermeneutics of the NQT

Reading the NQT today requires a hermeneutical method adequate to the complexity of the text and to the distance—cultural, theological, and historical—that separates the contemporary reader from the mock reader Dehon originally addressed. Such a method must hold together at least three interpretive perspectives: the historical, which attends to the specific

cultural and ecclesiastical context in which Dehon wrote; the narratological, which analyzes how the implied author constructs meaning through literary choices; and the theological, which evaluates the spiritual and doctrinal content of the text in dialogue with the Church's developing understanding.

This is, in the deepest sense, the kind of reading the implied author himself modeled: not passive reverence but active, discerning engagement—willing to be challenged, nourished, and where necessary corrected by the tradition he was transmitting.

Ultimately, Dehon's Notes Quotidiennes 35–45 stand as a monumental effort to bridge the divide between the temporal tragedies of the early twentieth century and the eternal promises of the Heart of Christ. For any reader willing to don the mask of the mock reader—to enter, however provisionally, the world that the implied author constructs—these notebooks provide a roadmap for discipleship in an age of secular crisis: a roadmap whose method is nothing less than total availability to God, and whose destination is the union of the human heart with the Heart from which it came.

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