

FATHER DEHON IN HIS CORRESPONDENCE

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CTDAF¹

INTRODUCTION

“Dehon in his texts”. This is the main theme of the Dehonian theological seminar for the year 2026. As indicated in the proposal put forward for this purpose by the Scientific Committee, the aim of this theme is to bring Fr Dehon’s dreams and questions to life in our present world, a world undergoing profound change. With this in mind, the CTDAF was invited to address this issue through the correspondence of Léon Dehon. This correspondence is available online on *Dehondocs*, and what is striking at first glance is both its volume and its diversity. In *Dehondocs*, they are divided into three main categories: Dehon’s letters, letters to Dehon, and circular letters. Given their number, the CTDAF made a selection for the purposes of this seminar. We have chosen to focus solely on Dehon’s letters, based on the underlying assumption that through them we might gain a more reliable insight into certain aspects of Fr. Dehon’s character. These letters span the period from 1864, when he had just obtained his doctorate in law in Paris, to 1923, two years before his death. How can this time frame be justified? The compilers say nothing about it. We might conjecture that these are the letters that came into their possession via the recipients or their acquaintances. We might also conjecture that, as his strength was failing, he ceased writing two years before his death.

His recipients are numerous and varied. That being the case, we have once again chosen to focus on certain recipients in particular; indeed, it would have taken a little over a year to read and understand his 59 years of correspondence. The fundamental criterion for selecting these recipients is the volume of Fr. Dehon’s correspondence addressed to them. Within this framework, we have therefore chosen to analyse the letters sent to four groups of correspondents: relatives, friends, ecclesiastical and civil authorities, and confreres. In considering these groups of correspondents within the context of this seminar’s themes, we have allowed our research to be guided by this threefold inquiry: As reflected in his correspondence, what questions did Dehon seek to answer? What were his responses in light

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of the expectations of his implicit recipients? What would be today's relevance of the questions and answers of Dehon's correspondence?

Our presentation of the results of this study will be structured around three key points. We shall first focus on the implicit recipients of the correspondence. This initial exploration will already provide an opportunity to draw attention to the historical contexts and to highlight the problems and challenges faced by these recipients. Secondly, we shall focus our attention on Dehon as seen in his correspondence. By further refining the contexts in which the letters were written, we shall attempt, by highlighting his approach to the questions raised by his recipients, to bring to the fore some key aspects of Dehon's personality. We shall conclude this exploration by attempting to interpret the findings of our study. This will provide an opportunity to assess and clarify the impact that a study such as this might have in relation to contemporary demands.

I. IMPLICIT RECIPIENTS AND FR. DEHON'S CORRESPONDENCE

A study of Fr. Dehon, based on his correspondence, requires that we do not overlook the recipients or the existential situations of which the letters are also a vehicle. Indeed, just as the figure of an author only takes shape through interactions with the diverse recipients of his work, so too the figure of Dehon in his correspondence does not emerge independently of his network of correspondents. Hence the importance of this stage, which requires us to turn our attention to the recipients of Fr. Dehon's correspondence by seeking out some of the faces of his implicit readers. In other words, to whom is the implicit author addressing himself?

As we noted in the introduction, Léon Dehon's epistolary legacy revolves around a large number of recipients. Time constraints and the methodological requirements of a study of correspondence such as the one we are undertaking have compelled us to focus on a few groups of recipients, including family, friends, religious authorities and confreres in his religious community. It should be noted that within these groups, the volume of correspondence varies. That said, by highlighting the contexts that define the reality of these recipients, we also hope to shed light on the issues and challenges linked to their life experiences and ways of thinking.

I. 1. The family

In the letters addressed to the family, the main implicit readers are: his parents (Jules-Alexandre Dehon and Adèle-Stéphanie Vandelet), his brother Henri, his first cousin and sister-in-law Laure, and his nieces. Broadly speaking, this is a family from the rural aristocracy, whose father was not only a merchant brewer and cattle farmer, but also a politician; he served as mayor of La Capelle from 1857 to 1862. This family, as a reader, is characterised by its kinship, closeness and intimacy with Léon Dehon. He therefore holds them in unfailing affection and devotion.

Fr Dehon's correspondence with his family began in 1864 when he set out with his friend Palustre to visit south-eastern Europe (Italy, Greece, the Balkans), the Middle East (Egypt, the Holy Land, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey) and central Europe. It is therefore during this prolonged period of separation that his correspondence with the family takes on a certain significance. The young Dehon leaves his family for a long time, venturing into a little-known world which, for Westerners, held not only mysteries but also dangers. This is thus a context in which the implicit reader experiences an agonising distance from a loved one. That being said, the main purpose of the correspondence is to inform this implied reader not only of the discoveries made during these journeys but also to allay the fear stemming from the Western perception of the dangers of the Eastern world. In this context, the implied reader is driven by a thirst for information and a constant need for reassurance. Thus, beyond family and personal events, the overall situation revolves around the need to exchange news, recount experiences and share future plans. It is in this sense that one can understand not only the abundance of Léon Dehon's letters to his family, but also his insistence on the need for his parents to write to him regularly².

From these letters, it appears that the main problem or challenge facing this implicit reader concerns, first and foremost, the implicit author's vocation to the priesthood. Indeed, it is clear that the implicit author's commitment to the priesthood lies at the heart of the instability, over a significant period, in his relationship with his parents, and more particularly with his father. In this regard, it is clear that the implicit reader is firmly opposed to the implicit author's vocational choice and is even tormented by it. This is attested to by these words from one of Dehon's letters to his father: "I hear from various sources," he writes, "that you are tormented at the thought of seeing me become a clergyman so soon"³. This man of liberal leanings dreams

² See Inv. 217.12, Letter from Fr. Dehon to his parents, Alexandria, 9 December 1964.

³ Inv. 218.19, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Jules-Alexandre Dehon, Rome, 6 May 1866.

only of a brilliant secular career for his son and finds it very difficult to comprehend the religious direction the latter is giving to his life. This is evident in these few extracts from Leon Dehon's correspondence: "You regret for me the honours and riches, and you believe that my affection for you has diminished. Well, you are mistaken. The dignity of the priesthood does not deprive one of honours, for it is the most honourable one can have on earth"⁴.

The challenge facing the implied reader in this case is therefore to find a way out of this profound disagreement over his son's future plans. To dissuade him from this religious vocation, he plays on the effect of time by delaying his entry into the seminary as long as possible: he first sends him to study in Paris and then suggests a long journey to the East and the Holy Land. The aim of this strategy is to persuade the son to change his mind without appearing coercive or giving him the impression of being forced. However, faced with the son's perseverance—who ultimately commits to the priesthood—we also see an implied reader who is disappointed, even revolted; he probably feels that he is not being listened to or that he has a disobedient son. An extract from the letter his son sent him in January 1867 makes this quite clear: "The pain you feel is the result of a mistake, and when you have recognised it, you will bless me and give thanks to God, and you will be grateful to me for having gone against your wishes"⁵. But this grieving father will have to face another challenge: that of putting his son's happiness before his own choices. In other words, we also see the emergence of a father figure open to the fulfilment of his son's happiness despite his own reservations. The trace of this paternal openness is evident in the son's words: "Now that you have accepted my vocation and its realisation has begun, all that remains is to follow the path that the good Lord shows us through our wise directors"⁶; "You were the first conquest of my priesthood, and I have put all my zeal into preserving it, and I always will"⁷. Let us conclude this point by emphasising that this implicit reader, through Léon Dehon's correspondence, is also confronted with the challenge of practising his Christian faith. The exhortations to partake of the sacraments and to pray are all indications of some shortcomings in this area. Here are a few extracts that bear witness to this: "And if Papa wishes to give me great pleasure, let him write to me that he goes to Mass every Sunday when he can"⁸; "I am counting on you to get yourself in right order this

⁴ Inv. 218.35, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Jules-Alexandre Dehon, Rome, 14 January 1867.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Inv. 218.42, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Jules-Alexandre Dehon, Rome, 6 April 1867.

⁷ Inv. 218.78, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Jules-Alexandre Dehon, Rome, 22 April 1869.

⁸ Inv. 218.41, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Jules-Alexandre Dehon, Rome, 11 March 1867.

year for Easter Communion”⁹. Then, whilst his father is travelling in Paris, he exhorts him in these terms:

“You could make the most of your stay in Paris by getting back into God’s good graces. I urge you to speak to the parish priest of Notre-Dame-des-Victoires. He is a holy and venerable old man. You can ask for him at his church. This does not require a great sacrifice on your part, since the only thing you are failing to do is observe Sunday. All you need to do is make a firm resolution to attend Mass every Sunday unless there is a serious impediment. The good Lord is truly not demanding, and we are not being unreasonable for risking so little for our eternal salvation”¹⁰.

Our implied reader is therefore marked by a need for spiritual support. He needs to be encouraged and urged to live out the commitments of his baptism.

I. 2. Friends

In his correspondence with friends, Léon Palustre and Charles Désaire stand out. His friend Palustre was an intellectual with a passion for literature, the arts and, above all, archaeology. He met Leon Dehon at the Faculty of Law in Paris. A doctor of law and a barrister, he devoted himself entirely to archaeology and art history. A member of the French Archaeological Society from 1862, he served as its president from 1876 to 1883. Among his many works, one should mention *La Renaissance en France* (3 vols., Paris 1879–1885), which he was unable to complete. It is thus worth noting that the essence of the relationship between Dehon and Palustre was forged around the academic world, culture and discovery. This spirit of research and discovery, which characterised their shared thirst for knowledge, was evident in their shared passion for travel: They travelled together to England, Scotland and Ireland in 1862, to Central Europe and Scandinavia in 1863, and to the Middle East in 1864–1865. It is also worth noting that Palustre had wanted to become a Dominican, but ultimately chose a married life. This detail tells us a bit about the religious aspect of Palustre’s life. This unfulfilled desire to become a religious gives us an intimation about his spiritual life. This implied reader is the travelling companion with whom the implied author undertook his first major journey through the Middle East, a journey that would profoundly awaken the young Dehon’s mind to the reality of the Eastern world.

⁹ Inv. 218.42, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Jules-Alexandre Dehon, Rome, 6 April 1867.

¹⁰ Inv. 218.38, Letter from Fr. Dehon to his parents, Rome, 3 February 1867.

As for Charles Désaire, he was a French priest who, from 1866 to 1868, was a fellow student of Father Dehon at the French Seminary of Santa Chiara in Rome. He was ordained a priest in 1868. After serving as a chaplain in Rome for two years, he entered the Congregation of the Assumption in Nîmes in October 1870, where he hoped to devote himself to the reform of higher ecclesiastical as a pastor at Choisy-le-Roi (1900) and finally as parish priest at Saint-Jean-Baptiste-de-Grenelle, in Paris (1904). Outside of their time together at the French Seminary, Charles Désaire was above all a great spiritual friend with whom Father Léon Dehon had conceived a plan to found a religious congregation specifically dedicated to higher ecclesiastical studies. He therefore shared a significant spiritual and priestly bond with Léon Dehon. This bond centred primarily on their spiritual and vocational quests, as well as on ecclesiastical and pastoral matters.

The implied reader here is thus in a priestly and spiritual partnership with the implied author. In this sense, one might say that this is a person with whom the author has shared an extensive and significant part of his every day life, his doubts, his fears and his dreams. With him, the author shares a certain human, intellectual and spiritual closeness. The challenge facing this implicit reader, and one he shares with the implicit author, is above all his vocational discernment. Dehon's relationship with both Palustre and Désaire was shaped by this process of vocational discernment: if Palustre eventually married, it was indeed following an unsuccessful stint with the Dominicans; before settling permanently in his diocese, Désaire, for his part, made a detour to the Assumptionists; for a long time, he was invited by Father Dehon to become a member of his congregation.

I. 3. The religious authorities

Here too, the implicit reader is multifaceted and always situated within the institutional Church. They are essentially the diocesan bishops (Soissons, Cambrai, Mechelen, etc.), the Roman cardinals (Rampolla, Ferrata, Ledóchowski, van Rossum, Gasparri, Merry del Val, Laurenti), the vicars general and capitular vicars, the heads of dicasteries (Bishops and Regulars, Propaganda Fide Index, Holy Office), and a few influential laypeople (Toniolo, Chesnelong, etc.), though always within an ecclesial framework. With regard to diocesan bishops, the focus of the correspondence revolves around requests, particularly for approvals, recommendations, permissions and honours. For Roman cardinals, the issues often relate to

requests for the congregation's approval, as well as matters concerning discipline and missions. At this level, it appears that the implicit reader is endowed with a certain degree of power and diverse competences; well-versed in canonical language and ecclesiastical discipline, he is attentive to doctrine and the directions of ecclesiastical policy.

It should be emphasised that this implicit framework operates within a strongly hierarchical ecclesiological environment characterised by a top-down conception of the Church. It is therefore an ecclesiological model in which power, authority and grace appear to flow in a direction from the top down to the bottom. That being the case, a sharp distinction is largely maintained between the 'teaching' Church (the clergy) and the 'taught' Church (the faithful). In this sense, transmission is practically one-way: spiritual and administrative authority is perceived as emanating from the top, the transcendent is essentially seen as descending. In other words, the institutional form tends to take precedence over the communal nature of the Church. Within this framework, the expectations of this implicit reader, is shaped by an ultramontane perspective marked by the centrality of Rome as the institutional seat of the Church (Propaganda Fide, bishops and religious orders, the Holy Office), mistrust of 'revelations' and modernism, the promotion of useful congregations (schools, missions, social works), and a sensitivity to obedience, discipline and 'sound doctrine'. Overall, this implicit reader is also expected to have developed a certain sensitivity to the spirituality of the Heart of Jesus as well as to social and missionary issues. Gradually, therefore, we see him moving from the French circle to the Roman circle, then to the global missionary network, via the anti-modernist milieu.

In this context, the implicit reader faces several challenges. First and foremost is the challenge of whether or not to approve the work initiated by the implicit author. In this sense, the question becomes whether the congregation is trustworthy and deserves legal recognition. A range of issues revolves around this challenge. Let us first consider the question of doctrinal suspicions linked to the so-called supernatural revelations of Sister Marie de Saint Ignace: could the work be the fruit of a suspect visionary? Then there is the question of the congregation's ecclesial and pastoral usefulness: what contribution would this work make to the pastoral progress of the Church? The issue at stake here is that of fidelity to the faith and to ecclesial communion. Flowing from this challenge is also the challenge of the Church's socio-political and missionary commitment. The question here is that of fidelity to the Magisterium's guidelines on social and political engagement, against the backdrop of Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum novarum*. To this question of fidelity to the Church's social doctrine is added that of the

commitment to and organisation of missionary activity *ad gentes*: how can a missionary organisation be established that is effective and canonically sound?

I. 4. The confreres

In the correspondence to confreres, there are obviously more than one implicit reader. While on the whole, all are linked to Fr Dehon through spiritual filiation, differences among them nevertheless emerge depending on their attitudes, roles and missions. Within this group of confreres, one may note a preference in his correspondence for particular confreres: Father Stanislas Falleur, the priests sent on mission (*ad gentes*), and, to a lesser extent, formators and young people in formation. What characterises this group as a whole is their religious filiation with the implicit author. They are all spiritual sons of Léon Dehon and therefore regard him as a ‘Father’.

Fr Stanislas Falleur was among the very first confreres (religious priests) to join Fr Dehon’s work. He was welcomed in October 1879. From 1878 to 1883 he was a teacher of *la huitième*, then of *la sixième*, at the Collège Saint-Jean in Saint-Quentin, where he also became bursar in 1881. In early 1883, Father Dehon sent him together with Father François-Xavier Lamour to found the novitiate in Sittard. He subsequently served as director of the Apostolic School of Fayet (1883–1884), director of the choir at the Basilica of Saint-Quentin (1886–1893), teacher and spiritual director at the Apostolic School of Fayet (1893–1897), superior of the novitiate at Fourdrain (1897–1905) and finally superior of the house at Saint-Quentin from 1908 to 1913 and again from 1924 to 1929. He was also general bursar (from 1888 until his death) and general procurator of the Congregation (1888–1891). The implicit reader here is therefore a formator, an educator, a teacher, with an expertise in the management of property and personnel. He is also a sort of private secretary to the implicit author. He is a chancellor to whom the author entrusts the drafting of some of his letters and even the preparation of the chapter¹¹. It is to him that the author entrusts the correspondence with benefactors, and the payment of stipends for the scholastics in the various seminaries (Saint Sulpice, Issy, Rome, Luxembourg, Sittard...). Beyond the religious bond that unites them, it therefore appears that this implicit reader shares a close relationship with this implicit author. His responsibility for

¹¹ See Inv. 1126.03, Letter from Fr. Dehon to the Congregation of the Priests of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Saint-Quentin, 31 July 1896.

the development of the congregation is significant. Evidence of this closeness can be seen in the abundance of correspondence addressed to him. The correspondence is sometimes as frequent as every other day, depending on the period. Beyond the religious bond that unites them, he maintains the same regular communication via the post, even when he is abroad. He is one of the people most informed about the organisation and daily life of the implicit author, whose frequent letters enable him to know all the details of their activities.

Among the most prominent missionary colleagues is Fr. Gabriel-Marie Grison. Ordained a priest in 1883, he joined the Congregation of the Priests of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, where he made his profession in September 1887. He served as a missionary in Ecuador (1888–1896), where he directed the college at Bahía de Caráquez, and subsequently in the Belgian Congo (1897–1942). After being the Apostolic Prefect of Stanley Falls from 1904 to 1908, in March 1908 he was appointed to be the titular bishop of Sagalassus and Apostolic Vicar of Stanley Falls, a post from which he resigned in March 1933. He died in Kisangani in 1942. In this context, the implicit reader addressed in the letters to missionary confreres is, in general, a person far from home, called upon to adapt to a new world and the new cultures opening up before him. He is often responsible for souls by virtue of his pastoral commitment. He is also very often a teacher, a pastor driven by a serious pastoral and missionary concern. In the context of carrying out his mission, this reader expresses the need for spiritual and material support. This is one of the implications of this passage from a letter from Fr. Dehon to Fr. Grison: “Do not take on too much. You cannot come to France to collect donations. It is in the United States that you might find resources”¹². He is also someone who needs more human resources. This is quite evident in this extract from a letter from Fr. Dehon to Fr. Grison, then a missionary in Ecuador: “You are wrong to think that I do not trust you because I did not send you exactly the priests you asked for. I came as close as I could. What more could I have done? I cannot consider the interests of a single mission alone”¹³.

In light of Fr Dehon’s correspondence, several challenges present themselves to this implicit reader. First and foremost is the challenge of the spiritual life: does he understand and lead his religious and pastoral life in accordance with the spiritual vision that the implicit author

¹² Inv. 500.11, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Fr. Gabriel-Marie Grison, Saint-Quentin, 20 December 1892.

¹³ Inv. 500.10, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Fr. Gabriel-Marie Grison, Saint-Quentin, 19 November 1892. On 2 August, Fr Dehon had sent Brothers Sigisbert Schneberger, Christophe-Marie Dumont and Bonaventure Henning to Ecuador (cf. 1LD 50006 and NQT 6/6) to assist Fr Grison at the college in Bahía de Caráquez. The first two were capable teachers, but they were not yet priests and had to complete their theological studies, and Father Grison felt a certain disappointment at this (cf. G. GRISON, *Souvenirs de l'Équateur*, Rome 1931, pp. 180–181).

has of his work? Linked to this question is that of community life: this is the challenge of fraternal charity. The economic question is also central to Léon Dehon's correspondence. In this regard, the challenge facing the implicit reader is above all that of living out his religious vows, particularly the vows of poverty and obedience. This challenge revolves around two important questions: how to increase the congregation's material and financial resources, and how to put them at the service of all and of the Church? The final challenge for this implicit reader is that of the growth of the congregation and its works. This also concerns vocational recruitment, formation and commitment to promoting the congregation's charism.

To conclude this point, it is worth noting that, since ancient times, the letter has played a central role in human relations as a means of exchange and communication. In the 19th century, due to rising literacy rates across societies, it became the primary means of social communication for bridging distances. Thus, it became a defining feature of family life, commercial ties and relations between institutions or organisations. The epistolary genre was, therefore, a preferred means of maintaining ties, expressing feelings, recounting daily life and resolving matters. It is in recognition of this prominent role of letter-writing in the 19th century that we can situate and understand the abundance and diversity of Fr Dehon's correspondence. It is a reflection of who he truly was: a man of his time. With this in mind, let us take a closer look at the figures of the implicit author revealed by this correspondence.

II. DEHON AS REVEALED IN HIS LETTERS

This second section offers a comprehensive reading of Léon Dehon's correspondence in two complementary parts. The first section (II.1) focuses on the form of his letters: their themes, their role in his life, their literary techniques, and the many resources—biblical, cultural, historical—that he draws upon. Here we see a sensitive writer, methodical and attentive to his correspondents, capable of shifting from familial tenderness ("I embrace you with all my heart") to poetic imagery or spiritual exhortations. The second section (II.2) explores the substance of this correspondence, that is to say, what it reveals about his major spiritual orientations and the various facets of Dehon: the man of the cross, the believer trusting in Providence, the apostle of the Sacred Heart, but also the founder, the prudent administrator, and the spiritual guide.

II. 1. Based on the form of his epistolary writings

II. 1. 1. The central themes of Léon Dehon's correspondence

Through his letters, Léon Dehon unfolds a rich epistolary world, in which each category of correspondent reveals a different facet of his personality, his concerns and his mission. His family letters are dominated by the tension between vocation and filial loyalty, expressing a heart torn between obedience to his parents and his inner calling. They are also a source of spiritual exhortation, as when he invites his father to renew his religious practice: “You could return to God’s favour... attend Mass every Sunday¹⁴”.

In his correspondence with friends, notably Léon Palustre, the letters open up to culture, the beauty of the world and intellectual friendship. He describes with wonder “the vine-covered hillsides of the picturesque town of Bar-le-Duc¹⁵” or “the impeccable monuments” of Athens, whose “harmony and beauty of form enchant the imagination¹⁶”. To Palustre, he also confides his impressions of Rome and the First Vatican Council: “The great event currently unfolding in Rome is the active preparation for the Council¹⁷”, emphasising “its supernatural beauties”.

The letters to his confreres constitute another strand, centred on the governance of the Institute, formation, fraternal life and mission. In them, Dehon gives concrete directives: “Take the opportunity to start a record book in every house... God will bless your obedience¹⁸”. These letters also serve as a forum for vocational discernment, particularly in his exchanges with Father Désaire, where he emphasises docility to grace and priestly reparation.

Finally, the letters to the ecclesiastical authorities in Soissons are marked by the themes of hierarchical obedience, the defence of the works, institutional crises and the quest for Roman approval. In them, he affirms his determination: “I wish to defend to the very end the right of ownership¹⁹ ...”, and rejoices when “our little congregation has just received the decree of

¹⁴ Inv. 218.37, Léon du P. Dehon to Jules-Alexandre Dehon, Rome, 3 February 1867.

¹⁵ Inv. 217.01, Fr. Léon Dehon to his parents, Strasbourg, 23 August 1864.

¹⁶ Inv. 217.07, Letter from Fr. Dehon to his parents, 12 October 1864.

¹⁷ Inv. 219.02, Fr. Dehon to Palustre, Rome, 21 March 1869.

¹⁸ Inv. 294.40, Letter from Fr. Dehon to the confreres, 14 March 1905.

¹⁹ Inv. 294.22, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Louis Armand Vitry, Saint-Quentin, 18 January 1905.

approval from the Holy See²⁰ ". These exchanges reveal a Dehon who is strategic, prudent, diplomatic, and concerned about the future of his work.

II. 1. 2. Correspondence in Dehon's life

Léon Dehon's letters are not mere exchanges of information. For him, they constitute a vital space for inner growth, a place where his thoughts, vocation and sensibilities take shape. In his letters to his parents, writing becomes a spiritual and emotional exercise: in them he reflects on his life, acknowledges his graces, and deepens his calling. Thus he confides: "I can only repeat to you all the delights I find in the service of God²¹ ", or again: "Religion does not diminish love for the family, but makes it truer and more ardent." In these exchanges, he learns to articulate faith, affection and discernment, and to become the shepherd of his own family.

Through his correspondence with Léon Palustre, the letters became an intellectual and aesthetic laboratory, where Dehon refined his perspective on art, history and culture. In them, he reveals a sure taste, a poetic sensibility and a contemplative intelligence: "Every day I grow more attached to Rome and especially to its supernatural beauties²² ", or again: "Open your soul a little to the poetry of these sentiments and close it to the dryness of criticism²³ ". This correspondence nourished his culture, stimulated his judgement, and enabled him to think about the Church in the long span of history.

Finally, in his letters to the authorities, his writing became a tool for ecclesial action. In them, Dehon reflected on the First Vatican Council, on the Church's mission, and on political crises: "All the most profound religious questions... will be addressed²⁴ "; "Our misfortunes are the work of God, who wished to punish both the government and the nation²⁵ " Writing enables him to understand the world, to discern Providence within it, and to engage with it lucidly.

Thus, the correspondence is not merely an appendix to his life: it is its beating heart, the place where his vocation, his thoughts, his culture and his action are woven together. It

²⁰ Inv. 1102.08, Letter from Fr. Dehon to François Gulhen, Saint-Quentin, 31 July 1906.

²¹ Inv. 218.10, Letter from Fr. Dehon to his parents, Rome, 10 January 1866.

²² Inv. 219.02, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Léon Palustre, Rome, 21 March 1869.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Inv. 219.08, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Léon Palustre, Rome, 12 October 1869.

²⁵ Inv. 219.13, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Léon Palustre, La Capelle, 7 October 1870.

reveals a profound, sensitive, cultured and spiritual Dehon, and it helped to shape the founder he would become.

II. 1. 3. The formal features of Dehon's correspondence

In his letters, Léon Dehon displays a surprisingly masterful style, in which several formal devices structure his thought and reveal the implicit author. Firstly, he relies on a rigorous organisation, always proceeding according to a clear progression — situation, analysis, sentiment, request — as when he writes to Palustre: “I surrender myself... to the supernatural joy of the priesthood” before moving on to the Council and shorthand²⁶. This structure is supported by a constant use of metaphors and poetic imagery, which transform Rome into a spiritual landscape: “The columns of its temples are the saints... the roses of martyrdom excel in their brilliance and their fragrance²⁷”. In his travel letters, he employs a precise, almost pictorial descriptive style: “The vine-covered hillsides of the picturesque town of Bar-le-Duc²⁸” or “The forests of olive trees, the hedges of cacti and aloes²⁹ ...”

Added to these techniques is a tone perfectly tailored to the recipient: tender and filial with his parents (“I send you my warmest regards”), fraternal and intellectual with Palustre (“I send you my warmest regards³⁰”), and respectful and hierarchical with the authorities. Finally, Dehon employs a spiritual and persuasive rhetoric, composed of gentle exhortations and theological arguments: “Mortification is a sacrifice of atonement³¹ ...”, or “Our Lord deigns to grant us an audience every morning³² ...”. These formal elements—structure, imagery, description, address, spiritual rhetoric—lend his correspondence a rare depth and reveal an author already fully formed, capable of uniting culture, sensitivity and spiritual depth in a lively and masterful style.

II. 1. 4. Material resources of the correspondence

²⁶ Inv. 219.02, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Léon Palustre, Rome, 21 March 1869.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Inv. 217.01, Letter from Fr. Dehon to the Parents, Strasbourg, 23 August 1864.

²⁹ Inv. 217.07, Letter from Fr. Dehon to the Parents, Athens, 12 October 1864.

³⁰ Inv. 219.05, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Léon Palustre, Rome, 16 July 1869.

³¹ Inv. 218.59, Letter from Fr. Dehon to the Parents, Rome, 31 January 1868.

³² Inv. 219.02, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Léon Palustre, Rome, 21 March 1869.

In his letters, Léon Dehon draws on a rich network of material resources, blending Scripture, spiritual tradition, history, art and even the sciences. His primary source is biblical: he re-examines his formation in the light of the Gospels, asserting that “the time spent in the seminary corresponds to the years the apostles spent with the Saviour³³”, and invokes the parable of “the prodigal son³⁴”. He also draws on spiritual authors, recommending to his mother “the gentle and accessible lessons in piety of Saint Francis de Sales³⁵” and citing the Korean martyrs as models of fervour³⁶. To this he adds historical and cultural resources: Greek antiquity (“Its flawless monuments³⁷ ...”), Egypt (“the colossal ruins of Memphis and Thebes³⁸”), the Middle Ages (“Study the Middle Ages carefully; it is worth it³⁹”). Finally, he draws on scientific and technical knowledge, such as the stenography of the Council “the ingenious system of stenography⁴⁰”, or the collection of minerals in Switzerland⁴¹. These diverse resources reveal an author nourished by Revelation, humanist culture and the sciences alike, a mind in which faith, intelligence and curiosity about the world converge.

II. 2. Based on his correspondence

II. 2. 1. The major spiritual choices of Léon Dehon as seen through his correspondence

In the nearly sixty years of letters, Dehon reveals a coherent spiritual framework, structured around a few major themes that recur throughout his correspondence, regardless of the recipients.

The spirituality of the cross: suffering offered, purification, reparation

In Father Dehon’s correspondence, the implicit author reveals a spirituality of the victim which constitutes one of the most consistent and profound themes of his inner world: for him, to be a ‘victim’ means entering into the dynamic of immolation, sacrifice and reparation, a direct participation in Christ’s sacrifice. To his fellow priests, he writes bluntly: “Always be

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Inv. 218.58, Letter from Fr. Dehon to the Parents, Rome, 19 January 1868.

³⁵ Inv. 218.59, Letter from Fr. Dehon to the Parents, Rome, 31 January 1868.

³⁶ Inv. 218.37, Letter from Fr. Dehon to the Superiors, Rome, 3 February 1867.

³⁷ Inv. 217.07, Letter from Fr. Dehon to the Parents, Athens, 12 October 1864.

³⁸ Inv. 217.12, Letter from Fr. Dehon to the Parents, Alexandria, 9 December 1864.

³⁹ Inv. 219.07, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Léon Palustre, Le Tréport, 26 August 1869.

⁴⁰ Inv. 219.02, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Léon Palustre, Rome, 21 March 1869.

⁴¹ Inv. 217.02, Letter from Fr. Dehon to the Superiors, Bellinzona, 29 August 1864.

a victim of the Heart of Jesus. Place your mind and body on the cross and do not let yourselves be seduced by anything worldly⁴²”, showing that religious life is not primarily a set of works, but an act of total self-offering. This logic of self-sacrifice is not abstract: it is rooted in a vision of Christ as the Lamb sacrificed, to whom the religious must conform. Thus, he states: “His special friends are the victims... Lamb of God, he loves the lambs who allow themselves to be sacrificed like him⁴³”. Apostolic fruitfulness flows directly from this immolation: “Be generous. The work will advance the more we are more united in immolation⁴⁴”. From this perspective, the cross is never an accident, but a place of spiritual fruitfulness. Dehon sees trials as a preparation and an offering accepted by God, as when he says of Fr Rasset: “Our Lord prepared him through great sufferings: persecution, family difficulties, illness. He is a true victim. He endured the operation and its aftermath with heroic courage, and he offered his life for the work. Our Lord has accepted it. He will help us⁴⁵”. Similarly, in the face of the Church’s crises, he emphasises that “works of reparation and self-sacrifice are necessary⁴⁶”, showing that suffering willingly borne becomes an act of apostolic fruitfulness. Thus, the implicit author appears as a man convinced that Christian life—and even more so religious life—finds its fruitfulness in union with Christ the Victim: offering oneself, immolating oneself, making reparation, accepting the cross as a place of inner transformation and salvation for others.

Absolute trust in Providence

In his correspondence, the implicit author reveals a radical trust in Providence, which for him becomes the ultimate key to understanding history, crises, decisions and even the most painful trials. This trust is neither naïve nor passive: it is a way of seeing God at work in everything that happens, even in what seems to contradict his plans. To a worried fellow priest, he writes with gentle firmness: “Do not let yourself be discouraged. The small trials that come your way are permitted by Our Lord to perfect you. The time of great graces is approaching. [...] Do not let yourself be troubled or discouraged by anything⁴⁷.” Providence is not here an abstract concept: it is a divine pedagogy, a way for God to form his servants. This same certainty

⁴² Inv. 330.01, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Stanislas Falleur, [no place], 16 June 1880.

⁴³ Inv. 465.01, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Alphonse Rasset, Notre-Dame de Liesse, 18 September 1880.

⁴⁴ Inv. 465.03, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Stanislas Falleur, Bollwiller, Notre-Dame de Liesse, 28 November 1880.

⁴⁵ Inv. 1110.05, Léon Dehon, to Marie-Joseph de l’Intérieur de Jésus, Rue Antoine Lécuyer, [Shortly after 4 November 1905].

⁴⁶ Inv. 1110.12, Léon Dehon to Marie-Joseph de l’Intérieur de Jésus, Saint-Quentin, 25 January 1907.

⁴⁷ Inv. 471.06, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Athanase Blandi, Saint-Quentin, 3 April 1904

appears in a letter to his parents, in which he expresses God's tenderness: "God loves us; he holds out his arms to us. He forgave Saint Paul, Mary Magdalene, the greatest sinners... When we are in a state of grace, Our Lord presents all our works to his heavenly Father⁴⁸ ." Providence is therefore for him a movement of love that envelops human life.

This providentialist interpretation also extends to ecclesiastical decisions, even when they contradict his own desires. To Father Hautcœur, he states: "We must see in this the will of God manifested through my superiors⁴⁹ ." And faced with the dissolution of his first institute, he writes with deeply moving docility: "Our Lord is now asking me to destroy what He asked me to build. I can only say my Fiat⁵⁰ ." Providence is therefore not merely a source of consolation: it is demanding, perplexing, yet always trustworthy.

In the midst of material difficulties, this trust becomes almost tangible, a daily reality. To Falleur, the congregation's bursar, he advised: "First tell our fathers to continue to pray well. The journey will be fruitful for the work⁵¹ ." And again: "Saint Joseph will provide for everything after allowing us to be humbled a little⁵² ." Providence is here an active presence, attentive to material needs, but one that comes through humility and trial.

Finally, even disasters become for him signs from God. After the hurricane that destroyed the façade of the Institute (his *Oeuvre*), he wrote: "Despite this, and perhaps because of this, the good Lord wished to send us a trial. We are in no way losing confidence⁵³ ." Providence is an educator, sometimes perplexing, but never absent.

The centrality of the Sacred Heart: love, reparation, oblation

In his correspondence, the author reveals a spirituality entirely centred on the Sacred Heart, experienced as the source of love, reparation and oblation (self-offering), and which he makes the beating heart of Christian and religious life. In his letters to his fellow brothers, this presence of the Heart of Jesus is concrete, daily, almost breathed in:

"Cor Jesu, quid me vis facere? That is our motto. Several times a day, in a moment of recollection, consult the Sacred Heart and your conscience, enlightened by grace, will answer you. [...] Jesus told Saint Peter to forgive 77 times 7 times; that means always. Humble yourselves; walk the way of the cross

⁴⁸ Inv. 218.58, Letter from Fr. Dehon to the Parents, Rome, 19 January 1868.

⁴⁹ Inv. 431.11, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Édouard Hautcœur, Saint-Quentin, 16 September 1874.

⁵⁰ Inv. 1184.05, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Bishop Odon Thibaudier, Saint-Quentin, 20 December 1883.

⁵¹ Inv. 465.07, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Stanislas Falleur, Prado, Lyon, 17 August 1881.

⁵² Inv. 326.07, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Stanislas Falleur, 8 August 1882.

⁵³ Inv. 1159.43, Letter from Fr. Dehon to the 'Bulletin de l'Union des œuvres ouvrières catholiques', March 1876.

from time to time. [...] How beautiful Jesus is! How good he is, how lovable!
What could we possibly refuse him⁵⁴ ?”

In times of crisis, this spirituality takes on a more sorrowful tone, yet remains confident: “Our Lord awaits his consolation from his victim and reparatory souls⁵⁵”, showing that for him, reparation is an intimate participation in Christ’s suffering out of love. Even in administrative letters, the theology of the Sacred Heart comes to the fore: in his petition to Leo XIII, he asserts that “Our Lord, in revealing his Heart, asked for love and reparation... it is above all from consecrated souls that He expects this affectionate compassion⁵⁶”. This reparation is not a secondary theme: it is the founding principle of his institute and of his vision of the Church. He writes: “It is the practical devotion to the Sacred Heart that is our goal. The principal means is reparation through adoration and works⁵⁷”; and again: “To console the Heart of Christ is the first and fundamental work⁵⁸”. This reparation is expressed in concrete practices: “Do you say a reparatory Mass from time to time⁵⁹ ?” Thus, the spiritual choice that emerges is crystal clear: the Christian life is a response of love to the wounded Heart of Christ, a movement of oblation and consolation that is worth more than any external work and which gives meaning to the whole of his apostolic and founding work.

Obedience as a path to holiness and mission

In his correspondence, the anonymous author reveals a profoundly spiritual conception of obedience, not as an external constraint, but as a conforming to the obedient Christ, a place where God’s will is manifested and where the mission unfolds. In his letters to the authorities in Soissons, this obedience takes the form of a humble and respectful filial relationship: he regularly signs off as “Your most humble and devoted son⁶⁰ ...”, expressing an inner readiness that endures even in the face of suffering or misunderstanding. To Abbé Hautcœur, he explains this theology of obedience as discernment: “One must see in this the will of God manifested by my superiors⁶¹”, showing that human authority is for him a mediator of Providence. This attitude is not confined to hierarchical relationships: to his fellow priests, he links obedience to

⁵⁴ Inv. 315.11, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Rogatien Bodin, Saint-Quentin, 11 August 1909.

⁵⁵ Inv. 1110.02, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Marie Joseph de l’Intérieur de Jésus, *Saint-Quentin*, 28 January 1905.

⁵⁶ Inv. 655.00, Léon Dehon and the Oblates of the Heart of Jesus to Leo XIII, February 1882.

⁵⁷ Inv. 1102.02, Letter from Fr. Dehon to François Guilhen, 21 October 1881.

⁵⁸ Inv. 1169.42, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Charles Désaire, 5 January 1880.

⁵⁹ Inv. 1169.58, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Charles Désaire, 24 August 1883.

⁶⁰ Recurring formula between 1873 and 1890.

⁶¹ Inv. 431.11, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Édouard Hautcœur, Saint-Quentin, 16 September 1874.

apostolic fruitfulness, writing, for example: “Take the opportunity to start a record of assessments in every house... Say that I require it and that the Holy See insists on it. [...] God will bless your obedience⁶²”. Even in his family life, obedience is lived as an act of love: “I am pursuing my studies with diligence, as you ask of me, but my heart, I confess, is turned elsewhere⁶³”, a sentence in which a painful yet accepted tension between filial duty and inner calling is evident. Thus, obedience appears in Dehon as a path to holiness, a place of truth, a space for mission: it does not extinguish freedom, but directs it towards God; it does not crush the person, but shapes them in the image of Christ who “became obedient unto death”.

Fraternal charity: gentleness, patience, forgiveness

In his letters to his confreres, the implicit author reveals a profoundly evangelical vision of fraternal charity, characterised by gentleness, patience, forgiveness and inner unity. For him, community life is a concrete exercise in mutual love, where each person carries the other in the light of the Sacred Heart. He thus exhorts his missionaries: “Be pious, modest, gentle... blessings will come⁶⁴”, and he asks them to live in true communion of hearts: “Share with one another your sorrows, your joys, your difficulties... *Cor unum et anima una*⁶⁵”. Forgiveness lies at the heart of this brotherhood: “Jesus told Saint Peter to forgive seventy-seven times seven times... that means always⁶⁶”. Even when he corrects, Dehon does so with gentleness: “Keep the peace and the gentle joy of a lamb. Our King Jesus is essentially peaceful, *rex pacis, agnus Dei*⁶⁷”. He insists further: “Do all this gently and in peace, trusting in the Sacred Heart⁶⁸”, and he warns against hasty judgements: “Do not worry about others. Interpret everything in a positive light⁶⁹”. Thus, the spiritual choice that emerges is crystal clear: gentleness is an imitation of Christ the Lamb, and fraternal charity—composed of patience, forgiveness and kindness—is the place where the truth of religious life is verified.

⁶² Inv. 294.40, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Stanislas Falleur, Saint-Quentin, 14 March 1905.

⁶³ Inv. 218.19, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Jules-Alexandre, Rome, 6 May 1866.

⁶⁴ Inv. 292.26, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Stanislas Falleur, Rome, 9 March 1894.

⁶⁵ Inv. 311.05, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Ludwinus Richters, 11 February 1903.

⁶⁶ Inv. 972.84, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Gerlach Kusters, Luxembourg, 12 March 1909.

⁶⁷ Inv. 465.04, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Stanislas Falleur, *Bollwiller*, 1 December 1880.

⁶⁸ Inv. 326.10, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Stanislas Falleur, Saint André, 30 November 1882.

⁶⁹ Inv. 465.05, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Stanislas Falleur, 24 April 1881.

II. 2. 2. Some ‘aspects’ of Dehon revealed in the letters

The implicit author: a man of affection and sensitivity

In the letters of his youth (1864–1871), the implicit author who emerges is not merely an enthusiastic traveller or a diligent student; he is a man of profound sensitivity—emotional, aesthetic and spiritual—whose writing blends familial tenderness, wonder at the world and a keen appreciation for art and history. His relationship with his family is marked by warm affection: “I send you my heartfelt love, Henri, Laure and Maman Dehon⁷⁰”; “The lack of news... saddens me greatly⁷¹”, he writes, worried about his mother’s health: “I hope that Maman... no longer even remembers her illness⁷²”. This sensitivity to relationships extends to friendship: “Palustre was waiting for me at the station: he is delighted to have me back⁷³”; “He sends his regards⁷⁴”. But it also extends to nature and landscapes, which he describes with the finesse of an aesthete: ““The vine-covered hillsides of the picturesque town of Bar-le-Duc⁷⁵”, ““The olive groves, the hedges of cacti and aloes⁷⁶ ...””. His perspective is also geographical: ““We visited Fribourg... then the lakes of Zurich and the Four Cantons⁷⁷”, and ethnographic: “Muslims setting off for Mecca, Greeks... Jews, Circassians⁷⁸”. Before Athens, his wonder becomes lyrical: “The harmony and beauty of the forms enchant the imagination”. With Léon Palustre, the art historian, he adopts a more scholarly tone: “I grow fonder of Rome every day, and especially of its supernatural beauties⁷⁹”, urging him to move beyond cold criticism: “You will open your soul a little to poetry...”. His gaze becomes symbolic: “The columns of its temples are the saints... the roses of martyrdom excel in their fragrance.” Even an abandoned castle evokes an aesthetic note: “Its state of bareness and abandonment is somewhat sad⁸⁰ ...” Finally, his sensibility is rooted in faith: “I would have nothing to say to you if I did not speak

⁷⁰ Inv. 217.01, Letter from Fr. Dehon to the Parents, Strasbourg, 23 August 1864; Inv. 217.01, Letter from Fr. Dehon to the Parents, Bellinzona, 29 August 1864; Inv. 217.07, Letter from Fr. Dehon to the Parents, Athens, 12 October 1864.

⁷¹ Inv. 217.13, Letter from Fr. Dehon to the Superiors, Alexandria, 15 December 1864.

⁷² Inv. 217.07, Letter from Fr. Dehon to the Superiors, Athens, 12 October 1864.

⁷³ Inv. 217.01, Letter from Fr. Dehon to the Superiors, Strasbourg, 23 August 1864.

⁷⁴ Inv. 217.12, Letter from Fr. Dehon to the Superiors, Alexandria, 9 December 1864.

⁷⁵ Inv. 217.01, Letter from Fr. Dehon to the Parents, Strasbourg, 23 August 1864.

⁷⁶ Inv. 217.07, Athens, Letter from Fr. Dehon to the Parents, 12 October 1864.

⁷⁷ Inv. 217.02, Letter from Fr. Dehon to the Superiors, Bellinzona, 29 August 1864.

⁷⁸ Inv. 217.12, Letter from Fr. Dehon to the Superiors, Alexandria, 9 December 1864.

⁷⁹ Inv. 219.02, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Léon Palustre, Rome, 21 March 1869.

⁸⁰ Inv. 219.07, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Léon Palustre, Le Tréport, 26 August 1869.

to you a little of God, for it is towards him that all my thoughts are turned.” Thus, the implicit author appears as a man of affection and culture, whose tenderness, wonder and spiritual depth intertwine to form a unified, vibrant and contemplative personality.

The founder: hierarchical dependence and the need for support

In the letter of 16 September 1874 addressed to Father Édouard Hautcœur, we see Léon Dehon’s vocational and pastoral discernment in the face of a prestigious offer: to become a professor at the new Catholic University of Lille. The letter shows how Dehon assessed a significant personal opportunity, consulted the diocesan authority, discussed the implications for the diocese and for the university, and finally entrusted himself to God’s will as conveyed by his superiors: “I felt I ought to go to Soissons to ascertain my bishop’s view ... I asked the vicars-general and the members of the council to weigh the pros and cons. One must see in this the will of God as manifested by my superiors⁸¹.”

In the early years, Dehon appears as a scrupulous young priest, heavily reliant on the bishop’s judgement. He interprets episcopal decisions as a direct expression of Providence: “This must be seen as the will of God manifested through my superiors⁸².” This obedience did not preclude a certain hurt when he felt kept at a distance: “He was a little surprised that all this negotiation had been conducted without his involvement⁸³.” Decades later, he still recalls the sacrifices made for the diocese, a sign that the need for recognition remains: “I expected more mercy from the Diocese of Soissons. I have made so many sacrifices there over the past 28 years⁸⁴!” This figure thus combines hierarchical dependence, a quest for legitimacy and sensitivity to misunderstandings.

The prudent and transparent administrator: financial rigour and administrative clarity

In his correspondence, the author reveals a man endowed with a keen sense of reality, constant administrative prudence and scrupulous transparency in the management of his works. Far from being merely a mystic or a man of prayer, he emerges as a leader capable of governing with method, precision and responsibility. His letters to the bishops of Soissons reveal a man attentive to the practical consequences of decisions: “Our works too, and particularly the

⁸¹ Inv. 431.11, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Édouard Hautcœur, Saint-Quentin, 16 September 1874

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Inv. 515.37, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Augustin-Victor Deramecourt, Rome, 20 March 1899.

Institution Saint-Jean, are caught up in this crisis. The discredit that would result from certain measures would ruin them⁸⁵ ". He makes no secret of the economic fragility: "Saint-Jean does not live off its own resources. There has been a significant deficit every year since its foundation⁸⁶ ". And when he reassures Bishop Deramecourt, he does so with accounting precision: "The house in Fourdrain has not a penny of debt... Saint-Jean has only 70,000 francs left in mortgages, which is not much when you consider that there used to be 300,000⁸⁷ ". Even in his apologies, he clearly distinguishes between the personal and institutional spheres: "My disputes with this notary concern family matters and are of no interest to the congregation⁸⁸ ".

This caution is accompanied by rigorous transparency. Although from an aristocratic background, Dehon lived modestly and demanded impeccable financial management. He received donations but immediately passed them on to his procurator, indicating the source and the intentions of the benefactors; he requested regular accounts and returned any unused sums himself. When he observed financial practices contrary to ecclesiastical rules, he intervened firmly: "Do not forget that all your loans against securities are contrary to ecclesiastical vows and rules... You must therefore put an end to them as soon as possible by selling everything that is saleable, without buying back any other securities⁸⁹". To a confrere who was too spendthrift, he wrote with anxious lucidity: "Your expenses have far exceeded your estimates. Are you not being too generous and too confident? Are your accounts in order as they should be?... Make only the most urgent expenditures. Postpone any improvements that are not urgent⁹⁰".

Dehon also encouraged the communities to take charge of their own affairs: the manufacture and sale of soap, local activities, and the autonomous management of expenses. He was not lenient towards laziness: he reproached Fr. Dalloue for his lack of diligence and imposed obedience upon him to ensure the fulfilment of his duties⁹¹ . This insistence is never harsh: it is the mark of a man who wants his communities to live in truth, responsibility and fidelity to the Church. Thus, the implicit portrait that emerges is that of a founder who is prudent

⁸⁵ Inv. 1184.05, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Bishop Odon Thibaudier, 20 December 1883.

⁸⁶ Inv. 1184.06, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Bishop Odon Thibaudier, Saint-Quentin, 26 February 1884,

⁸⁷ Inv. 515.37, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Augustin-Victor Deramecourt, Rome, 20 March 1899.

⁸⁸ Inv. 276.07, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Augustin-Victor Deramecourt, 1905.

⁸⁹ Inv. 121.09, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Stanislas Falleur, 1909.

⁹⁰ Inv. 974.31, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Gerlach Kusters, 1911.

⁹¹ See Inv. 291.17, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Stanislas Falleur, Rome, 23 April 1898.

in his decisions, transparent in his finances, demanding yet just in his governance—a man for whom administrative integrity is inseparable from spiritual fidelity and the mission.

Father Dehon, a guide and counsellor to his sons

In his correspondence, Father Dehon appears as a true father and spiritual guide, attentive, demanding and deeply affectionate towards his confreres, whom he almost always addresses as ‘Dear son...’, a sign of a fatherhood he embraced and lived out. His advice is constant, practical, nourished by the Gospel and gentleness, and the words he addresses to them are always kind: “Always be pious, modest and gentle, and blessings will come⁹²”. To the missionaries, he recommends reading the lives of the saints, trust in Providence and fraternal unity: “You are one of the elders there; do your best to foster unity... Share your sorrows, your joys and your difficulties with one another... *Cor unum et anima una. Ipsi a Deo didicistis ut diligatis invicem*”⁹³. To a missionary in Finland, he wrote: “Do not let yourself be discouraged. Works are founded on the cross. The devil fights against us, but there is no danger to the work; the Sacred Heart will always save us⁹⁴.” To Fr Bodin, he opened his heart:

‘If you need a little guidance, open your heart to me. Am I not your father? But Our Lord wishes to do much on his own. Say often: **Cor Jesu, quid me vis facere**. That is our motto. Several times a day, consult the Sacred Heart too in a moment of recollection, and your conscience, enlightened by grace, will answer you. You will sense the dispositions you need to adopt... Jesus told Saint Peter to forgive 77 times 7 times; that means always. Humble yourselves; make the Way of the Cross from time to time. If you do not have a chapel at your disposal, have a blessed crucifix for the Way of the Cross⁹⁵.’

His fatherly nature is also evident in his practical concern: he visits communities in France, Belgium, Holland and Italy, listens to everyone, and recommends care for the sick, gentleness in correction, charity in making demands, and attention to the elderly. He sends greetings to his confreres and apologises when he cannot be present: “I would have gladly come to celebrate with you tomorrow, but I believe it would be hurtful to Bishop [Grison] if I were to leave him for the whole of tomorrow. I have only this one day left to spend with him, and it may be the last. In four years’ time, either he or I may be dead. Once again, happy feast day.

⁹² Inv. 292.26, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Stanislas Falleur, Rome, 9 March 1894.

⁹³ Inv. 311.05, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Ludwinus Richters, 11 February 1903.

⁹⁴ Inv. 972.84, Letter to Fr Gerlach Kusters, Luxembourg, 12 March 1909.

⁹⁵ Inv. 315.08, Letter to Rogatien Bodin, Sittard, 24 June 1909.

Let us pray for one another⁹⁶.” Even towards those who have caused him difficulties, such as Fr Blancal, he remains kind. To a fellow priest in crisis, he writes: “Your vocation is not lost... Jesus loves you... Always have faith⁹⁷ !” And when he has to correct someone, he does so firmly but without harshness, reminding Fr Falleur of the need for politeness, charity and respect for young people. Finally, he brings everything back to oblation: “When we suffer, let us say: It is for Jesus, for the Sacred Heart, for the work... *Ubi labor amatur, non laboratur*... Constant union with Jesus, union with the Sacred Heart, gently, humbly, in the spirit of faith⁹⁸”. Thus emerges a spiritual father of rare humanity, firm and tender, demanding and merciful, deeply devoted to his sons.

Father Dehon, a man of organisation

In his correspondence, Father Dehon comes across as a remarkably organised man, capable of planning, delegating and supervising with almost instinctive precision. He knew how to choose competent collaborators, foremost among whom was Fr Stanislas Falleur, who entered the Institute in 1882 and was quickly recognised for his administrative talents: bursar of the Saint-Jean College, then procurator general, private secretary and de facto chancellor in charge of correspondence, accounts, and the stipends of the scholastics (Saint-Sulpice, Issy, Rome, Luxembourg, Sittard), relations with publishers and publications⁹⁹. Dehon also praised other collaborators, such as in Rome: “Fr. Barthélemy [Dessons] is indeed the right man for the job; he is meticulous and active¹⁰⁰”. His sense of order is such that when travelling, sometimes for months at a time, he tells Falleur the exact location of documents in his room, evidence of a rigorous spatial memory¹⁰¹. His travels, far from being improvised adventures, are meticulously planned and nourish his missionary vision as much as his spiritual life. He demands the same rigour from his sons: “Take this opportunity to start a ledger of accounts in every house, as we have always kept at Saint-Jean. Provide a template. Tell them that I require it and that the Holy See insists on it. Settle your accounts with all the houses. God will bless

⁹⁶ Inv. 972.16, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Gerlach Kusters, 4 January 1909.

⁹⁷ Inv. 315.09, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Rogatien Bodin, 6 July 1909. This confrere eventually left the congregation in 1919.

⁹⁸ Inv. 228.03, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Théodore Heiserholt, Saint-Quentin, 20 August 1909. See also Letter to Falleur dated 23 October 1898; Letter to Grison dated 22 June 1885.

⁹⁹ Cf. Inv. 584.47, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Stanislas Falleur, 31 July 1896.

¹⁰⁰ Inv. 584.47, Letter to Marie-Joseph de l'Intérieur de Jésus, Saint-Quentin, 21 August 1909.

¹⁰¹ See Inv. 314.07, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Stanislas Falleur, Rome, 10 November 1900.

your obedience¹⁰².” For him, order was a spiritual virtue, an extension of the vow of obedience. He encouraged concentration and self-control: “Let your young men each attend to their duties... if they wish to have peace of mind¹⁰³”. To another, he wrote: “Work in humility... Observe the rule as much as possible: prayers, daily duties... and an annual account of your income and expenditure¹⁰⁴”. Despite this discipline, he himself carried out an impressive amount of work: “Nine sermons... 77 to be delivered, 19 written, 67 to be written. One needs the graces of the state. Let us hope¹⁰⁵”. Thus emerges a methodical, structured, demanding founder, for whom organisation is not an administrative detail, but a way of serving God with intelligence, fidelity and efficiency.

The twilight of a tormented author: between mysticism, patriotism and activism

The author also emerges as a deeply tried figure, torn by the spiritual, political and social tensions of his time. The confiscation of the house in Saint-Quentin in 1905 reveals, first and foremost, a wounded man yet possessed by an unshakeable faith: he accepts the trial as a participation in the Passion of Christ, asserting that “*the cross is always good... Jesus has nothing better to give us*¹⁰⁶”. Even the death of his missionaries, such as that of Fr. Ambrosius Hoffmann, becomes for him “*a victim*¹⁰⁷” which God “*will take into account*”, a sign of a spirituality marked by reparation and offering.

But that same year saw the emergence of a Dehon torn between his love for France and his fidelity to the Church. He wanted “*to set an example of civic duty to my fellow citizens*¹⁰⁸”, whilst denouncing the confiscation as a “*sacrilegious theft*¹⁰⁹” leading to “*excommunication*”. The text compares him to Saint Paul in Romans 9–11: a man who loves his people passionately but suffers to see them betray their spiritual heritage. Dehon even seems to consider that France has “*sold its soul to the devil*”, revealing the depth of his patriotic wound.

¹⁰² Inv. 294.40, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Stanislas Falleur, Saint-Quentin, 14 March 1905.

¹⁰³ Inv. 215.17, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Thaddeus Böcker, Saint-Quentin, March 1906.

¹⁰⁴ Inv. 471.14, Letter to Athanase Blandin, Rome, 29 January 1906.

¹⁰⁵ Inv. 294.58, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Stanislas Falleur, Leuven, 19 January 1909.

¹⁰⁶ Inv. 1110.02, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Marie Joseph de l'Intérieur de Jésus, Saint-Quentin, 28 January 1905.

¹⁰⁷ Inv. 475.12, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Stanislas Falleur, Saint-Quentin, 9 April 1905.

¹⁰⁸ Inv. 670.17, Letter from Fr. Dehon to Louis Armand Vitry, Saint-Quentin, 18 January 1905.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

Added to this wounded loyalty was a head-on ideological struggle, marked by the prejudices of his time. In a letter dated 1898, he identified “*the Jews, the Protestants and the Freemasons*¹¹⁰” as “enemies” of the nation, and called for “*the secret designs of the lodges to be exposed*”. In his view, Freemasonry had been acting against the Church for a century, and Catholics must combine “*the prudence of the serpent with the simplicity of the dove*¹¹¹”. Yet the text also reveals his contradictions: despite his accusations, he later proposed selling a clock to Jews to settle a debt, a sign of pragmatism that tempers his ideological discourse.

Finally, his patriotism proves to be deeply rooted in the local community. He seeks to strengthen Catholic influence even in his native village, requesting a medal of Saint Gregory for his brother Henri, mayor of La Capelle, in order to consolidate his prestige and “block the path of the Freemasons”. This gesture reveals Dehon as a strategist, keen to defend the Church not only in major national battles, but also in the most concrete political balances.

Thus emerges a complex, passionate, and at times contradictory Dehon: a mystic of the cross, a wounded patriot, an ideological activist, and a figure deeply rooted in local life. A figure buffeted by the storms of his time, yet always driven by the conviction to serve God and France.

A multifaceted author, unified by a profound inner coherence

Throughout his correspondence, the figure of Léon Dehon emerges in all his human, spiritual and pastoral depth. His letters, in both form and content, reveal a man deeply unified within, even when facing contrasting or trying situations. Formally, his writing displays remarkable mastery: clarity, gentleness, precision and authority combine to create a lively epistolary style, tailored to each recipient. This ability to write with accuracy and truth makes his letters a privileged place where his soul is revealed.

In substance, his correspondence reveals the main themes of his spiritual life: the centrality of the cross, experienced as a participation in Christ’s sacrifice; absolute trust in Providence, which transforms every trial into a path of growth; devotion to the Sacred Heart, a source of love, reparation and self-offering; finally, fraternal charity, characterised by gentleness, patience and unity. These themes, consistent over several decades, reveal a man whose inner life is deeply coherent and oriented towards God.

¹¹⁰ See Inv. 1168.37, Letter to Jules Lemire, Rome, 7 March 1898.

¹¹¹ Inv. 1171.26, Letter to a Hungarian clergyman, Leuven, 31 January 1909.

But the letters also reveal a Dehon rooted in history, with his strengths and weaknesses: a young priest dependent on his superiors, a founder who was prudent and rigorous in his management, a spiritual father attentive to his sons, a methodical organiser, but also a man who was at times tormented, wounded by anti-clerical persecutions and engaged in the ideological struggles of his time. His stances, particularly against Freemasonry, bear witness to a context marked by tensions between the Church and society.

Thus, Dehon's correspondence reveals a man who was deeply spiritual, yet also practical, sensitive, demanding and committed. It serves as a faithful mirror of his personality: a heart given over to God, a discerning intellect, and a will oriented towards the service of God, the Church and his brothers.

III. THE RELEVANCE OF FATHER DEHON'S LETTERS

III. 1. Discrepancies in relation to time and place

In our time, there have been changes in both communication and events. Certain expressions in the letters may shock the sensibilities of our contemporaries. This applies particularly to the forms of address in letters to the authorities, as well as the almost morbid humility with which Father Dehon addresses them. Expressions such as 'your most humble and devoted son', 'respectful and filial devotion', 'Your Excellency' ... are phrases from another era. Today, polite forms of address are still used, but with words devoid of emotion. Yet, in letters to his fellow priests, Father Dehon sometimes verges on insolence.

In addressing his confreres, Father Dehon always uses the title 'Monsieur'. He always addresses Falleur as: 'Monsieur Falleur' and 'dear Monsieur...' Was it the influence of late 19th-century anticlericalism that led to the use of this form of address? He also uses the expression 'dear son', which is understandable, given his role as Superior General of the order. Today, it is more appropriate for religious to address one another using the phrase 'dear confrere'. We regularly receive circular letters and even personal correspondence from Superiors General. They always refer to 'dear confreres', not 'dear son' or 'Monsieur/Messieurs'... We recall that in President Mobutu's Zaire, people addressed one another simply as 'citizen', and even among religious, the term 'Sir' was banned. But forms of address change with the times and societies.

Today, information travels ever faster, and audiovisual media are changing the volume and style of writing and communication. Today, one imagines that for Father Dehon's travels,

photographs would be more plentiful than lengthy descriptions of discoveries and landscapes. The written accounts would serve merely as illustrations, allowing the reader to discover many things and interpret them for themselves. Furthermore, with the development of communication technologies, such as the internet, readers can now follow the places visited by the author themselves, and with great speed. Nevertheless, we are losing the beauty of language and the mental images that the letters of yesteryear evoked or inspired. Our contemporaries have lost their taste for poetry because of audiovisual media.

Furthermore, for a Western reader today, Dehon's relationship with his parents reflects a traditional concept of the family that is now outdated. In the Western world, the family has become more nuclear, and this has significantly altered the relationships between children and parents. One imagines that the tensions and hurt caused to his father and to Father Dehon himself by his decision to become a priest would not have the same impact today, as respect for children's freedom is more emphasised than it was in nineteenth-century Europe. The father's concern was the inheritance of these estates and his castles. At the time, these assets represented substantial wealth. With the development of industry, wealth has shifted, and today people invest not only in industry but also in the virtual world. Moreover, children are no longer obliged to follow in their fathers' footsteps. One imagines that today, if the son of an industrialist were to choose to devote his life to God, it might well cause disappointment, but not on the same scale as in Dehon's day. Behind the father's opposition lay also the fear of the disgrace that abandoning his ancestors' legacy would bring upon his offspring. This brings to mind Jean de La Fontaine's poem, 'The Farmer and His Sons', in which the father devises a ruse to persuade his sons not to abandon their ancestors' work after his death, by deceiving them into believing that a treasure was hidden in the field and that they must find it. After their father's death, for a whole year, they searched and dug, leaving no spot untouched by their hands. Although they found no money, they understood the lesson their father had sought to teach them: "Work is a treasure".

We also find a Father Dehon enamoured of devotions that cause him problems and from which he finds it hard to part. He is truly a man of his time, with his frequent visits to shrines and his belief that this contributes to the growth of his order. The Holy See had long noted his credulity or naivety regarding certain devotions, and this is why it went so far as to make the recognition of his order conditional upon the removal of certain nuns from the communities where they were working alongside the Dehonians. The Holy See probably

suspected that these Sisters were influencing him with their devotions, which bordered on credulity¹¹². Yves Ledure noted in an article that although Dehon obeyed the Holy See and although he fostered his congregation's drive towards social engagement, he remained confined to a spirituality of victimhood and reparation, tainted by the dolorism of the Church during the French Revolution¹¹³.

Furthermore, his attachment to the French School of Spirituality left Dehon with a certain chauvinism that is evident in his letters. Although a proponent of reading the signs of the times, the separation of Church and State in France seemed to him a blasphemy likely to bring divine punishment upon his homeland, which the Sacred Heart had so loved and showered with blessings. Father Dehon belonged to an era when people still dreamt of a Christian world, or of a time when society and the Church were one. Secularism in France was still in its infancy in his day. Today, with secularisation or de-Christianisation, the sentiment of Christian nationalism no longer makes sense. Marcello Neri also noted that the opening of new Dehonian presences on other continents and the gradual decline in the number of European confreres are distancing the Congregation day by day from its central core and rendering devotion centred on an image such as that of the Sacred Heart ambivalent and problematic. Certainly, beyond the borders of Europe, there is a kind of spiritual iconoclasm that rages against certain European elements that continue to circulate in the practice of faith and devotions¹¹⁴. Consequently, there is today an urgent need to contextualise the founding charism, taking into account the diversity of lived experiences derived from spirituality that foster a sense of togetherness capable of giving Dehonian spirituality a plural form (cf. Yogyakarta Seminar. Presentation by the CTDAF).

III. 2. What legacy of Dehon does a reading of his letters suggest to us?

Having discussed some of Dehon's limitations—among many others—in his letters, let us ask ourselves how today's reader, particularly us Dehonians, can benefit from his correspondence.

¹¹² "The Holy See has asked us to remove the few sisters from various congregations who were assisting us in three of our educational institutions. This has been done. The last of them will leave on 5 and 15 August [1907]. We are firmly resolved to obey exactly¹¹²." Letter to Cardinal Ferrata dated 6 July 1907.

¹¹³ Cf. Yves Ledure, "Une congrégation à la recherche de son principe d'identité", in *Dehoniana* (2007), pp. 45–52.

¹¹⁴ See Marcello Neri, *Giustizia nella misericordia, Europa, cristianesimo e spiritualità dehoniana*, EDB, Bologna, 2016, p. 24.

The reader may place themselves in the position of Father Dehon's correspondents or in the position of Father Dehon himself as he writes these letters. We shall confine ourselves to the first option.

The Dehonian can take Dehon as a model and imitate him in the various stages of his life. In his correspondence with his parents, Father Dehon feels fully at home as a son of his family and, despite his father's reluctance regarding his vocation, he sets an example of perseverance whilst also making an effort towards his father's conversion. With patience, yet also with boldness, he tried to persuade and negotiate with his father regarding his vocation. This trial instilled in him, at least in its early stages, the ability to understand others with patience, even when he is certain that they are mistaken, and not to defend his own positions and convictions in a stubborn or aggressive manner.

Many young people here in Africa today find their choice to serve the Lord thwarted by their parents and relatives, who dream of a promising career for them or of the family succession or inheritance of family assets. The account drawn from Father Dehon's correspondence with his parents can serve as inspiration and encouragement to them. Not to go to war against their parents, but to set out on their path with patience and perseverance, praying for their conversion. We also have a few cases of confreres who have been reconciled with their parents after so many years of opposition to their vocation. They might be called the 'Dehons' of our time.

Faithful to tradition yet open to innovation. This is how we might describe Father Dehon's attitude during the founding of his work. In his letters to church authorities, he demonstrates filial obedience and gratitude towards the Church, yet he also wishes to be of service to his Church. He notes shortcomings but seeks to correct them gently. This attitude shows us how to be sons of our Church, of our congregation, of our entity or of our community. Always remaining faithful to the principles, the charism, the spirit, yet always seeking to innovate, to add something more to the heritage we have received. However, innovation does not come about through rebellion or harsh criticism, but through dialogue, gentleness, persuasion and love. We, today's Dehonians, must follow in our founder's footsteps. We must always be sons of our Church and our congregation, whilst always valuing their achievements and constantly seeking to enrich them.

It is not immediately obvious that Father Dehon's regular travels, as described in his letters, reveal him to be a man of open mind. As in his letters from Southern Europe, the Middle

East and Central Europe, and later his ‘journey around the world’, he discovers realities, compares them, and sees opportunities for the missions. We too can follow in his footsteps. A Malian proverb says that a young person who has travelled through a hundred villages is the equal of an old man who has lived a hundred years. Today’s Dehonians would do well to open themselves up to the world. Dehon’s journey to Turkey and other parts of the Middle East dispelled his own fears regarding Western prejudices about certain places in the East, and he reassured his parents—who were likely to share those fears—about his joy at finding himself in these environments reputed to be dangerous. Ignorance of others, of their traditions and daily lives, can erect barriers and even breed hatred and unnecessary wars. Openness, on the other hand, can put an end to this and enrich us all. Christ sets us an example in his encounter with the Samaritan woman in John 4:4–42.

Rereading the works of Father Dehon gives us the joy of finding ourselves on other continents or in countries other than our own, and of dispelling our fears and those of our brothers elsewhere regarding the facts and realities of these countries and continents. The Dehonian, who travels like Father Dehon, is called to dispel fears and prejudices, to invite peoples to value one another, and to put one’s own certainties into perspective. In recent years, our General Chapters and theological seminars have immersed us in themes such as interculturality, the synod and synodality, a heart open to the world, *Sint Unum*... Our founder would be proud to see us engaging with these concepts to pursue his ideal.

In some of our oblation prayers, we ask the Lord to inspire us with the same humble and joyful service in the footsteps of our Founding Father. We have spoken of his leadership, which consists in always seeing the best in others, valuing them, and, when they set a bad example, correcting them with words that are less hurtful, in being attentive to all kinds of people; and in being more demanding of ourselves than of others. Every Dehonian leader should make the virtues of our Founding Father their own, drawing on the guiding principles: “*Ecce venio, Ecce ancilla*, prophets of love and servants of reconciliation.”

Now, let us ask ourselves: if Father Dehon were living today, what would he have written to his readers? This may be the conclusion of our work.

LETTER FROM FATHER DEHON TO HIS SONS

On the way to the 150th anniversary of the Congregation

Dear sons,

It has been 150 years since, inspired by the Sacred Heart of Our Lord Jesus Christ, our Congregation came into being. This jubilee year brings to mind many memories, which I cannot recount to you in full in this letter, the sole purpose of which is to wish you a happy anniversary. However, I am certain that, in reading my correspondence with my correspondents, you have been moved by one or other of the events recounted; in places you may have been edified, astonished or even shocked. But as Saint Pope John Paul II says in *Vita consecrata*, no. 110, ‘You are not merely to recall and recount a glorious history, but *you are to build a great history!*’ Look to the future, where the Spirit is sending you once again to do great things.’

Your era is not mine, and you belong to countries and continents whose realities differ from those of my society and my time. But revisiting the path you have travelled, meditating on the culmination of your forebears’ lives, as the Letter to the Hebrews says (Heb 13:7–9), will give you the motivation for greater commitment. I would therefore like to say, in a few words, that this commemoration must not be a mere child’s play but the celebration of a legacy you have received, which you are called upon to develop and pass on to future generations.

You are aware, through my letters, of the early history and history of our Congregation, which is now celebrating its 150th anniversary. I would therefore like to recount a few of the many gaps you have encountered in my letters.

When I obtained my doctorate in law at the Sorbonne in 1864, I renewed my desire to become a priest for the umpteenth time to my father. To discourage me and perhaps make me forget the idea, he suggested I visit the Middle East, Southern Europe and Central Europe. I undertook an eight-month journey with a faithful and kind companion, my friend Léon Palustre, with whom I shared much in common during our time at the university in Paris. At the end of this journey, I decided to enter the French seminary in Rome on the recommendation of the Holy Father, Pope Pius IX, who received us in audience in May 1865. My greatest struggle at the start of my studies in Rome was to convince my father that my choice was not meant to hurt him, but because of my calling which came from the Lord, who, unbeknownst to me, had great plans for me. I prayed during my seminary years for his conversion, and God answered my prayers. I was also supported during this time by mentors, my superiors at Santa Chiara, and friends with whom you are familiar through our exchanges. By the grace of God, I was ordained a priest in December 1868 in the presence of my father, who had travelled to Rome with my mother. I spent a further three years in Rome preparing for my doctorates in theology,

philosophy and canon law. At the end of 1868, I was appointed a stenographer for the First Vatican Council, which began in July 1870. We were trained to take notes using this method. It was a great pleasure for me to take part in this great assembly, which welcomed to Rome bishops from all over the world.

After obtaining my three doctorates in Rome in 1871, I returned to my diocese of Soissons in France, where I was appointed the seventh curate of the Basilica of Saint Quentin, responsible for visiting the sick, then chaplain to the schoolchildren, and in 1873, chaplain to the Sisters Servants of the Sacred Heart. My apostolate opened my eyes to the misery of the town's spinning mill workers, who were exploited like beasts of burden, and the idea came to me to do something, not only to alleviate the suffering of these unfortunate people, but to encourage reflection on the transformation of society through the Gospel. This is where the work of Saint Joseph originated.

I always felt that the Lord was calling me to the consecrated life, but no existing ideal truly appealed to me. Thus, little by little, he gave me clarity regarding the congregation I should found to extend the reign of his Heart in souls and in society. I shared this with my bishop, Bishop Thibaudier, who had other plans for me, namely, to found a college in Saint-Quentin. This worked out well; I accepted it willingly, setting both works in motion at the same time.

I entered the novitiate in 1877, whilst founding and running the college. I took my religious vows on 28 June 1878, which I consider to be the date of our Congregation's birth.

The Lord opened the doors to the first companions, Fathers Charcosset and André Prévot, on the very day of my profession; then vocations arrived in such numbers that it became necessary to open an apostolic school in La Fayette, and to send the students to various seminaries in Paris, Brussels and Rome after they had completed their novitiate in Saint-Quentin. Difficulties were not long in coming. You are aware of my situation with the Servant Sisters, our Sisters, who helped me so much in founding the work and for whom I was criticized for believing that one had given her life for me and that I had placed too much weight on the revelations of another, Sister Marie Ignace. This led to misunderstandings between my bishop and myself and, combined with the Captier affair, the situation resulted in the suppression of our institute for some eight months. It was a painful ordeal, but does not the Apostle Peter describe trials as the refining of gold by fire? (1 Pet 1:7). I was brought low but not defeated. The Lord inspired me to act with restraint during that time and, like the Virgin Mary, I simply said to him, 'Fiat! Thy will be done.'

When the suspension was lifted, a period of flourishing began. We opened houses in Holland, Belgium and Luxembourg, and we even considered going overseas for evangelisation, thanks to the great zeal of Father Gabriel Grison. In 1888, he set sail for Ecuador with Father Irénée Blanc, mainly to Quito, where he lived for ten years with successive waves of confreres and scholastics until their expulsion in 1896. It was not long before he went to the Belgian Congo in 1897 to open a new missionary front with Father Gabriel Lux. Meanwhile, the order was growing in Europe; confreres from other countries where we were not yet present, such as Germany and Italy, were knocking at the door. A second overseas mission was established in southern Brazil in 1894, and this growth was only set to accelerate at the dawn of the 20th century.

We went through difficult times, complicated by the opposition of certain bishops. Openness to other cultures was not always easy, nor was maintaining unity. We faced financial difficulties, sometimes lacking resources, but Providence did not abandon us. God gave me wonderful colleagues such as Father Stanislas Falleur and Barthélémy Dessons in administration, people devoted to formation such as Father André Prévot, who served as novice master for over two decades..., and lay collaborators such as Léon Harmel, the industrialist from Val-de-Bois.

When Pope Leo XIII published his social encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1891, he was echoing my own concerns, for I had been deeply involved in social ministry in Saint-Quentin since the early years of my priesthood. I had also launched a periodical in 1889 entitled *The Reign of the Heart of Jesus in Souls and Societies*. I had the honour of an audience with him in 1893, during which he recommended that I preach his encyclicals in France. The years 1894–1898 were a time of intense activity in spreading the Pope’s teachings through working groups such as Christian Democracy. We were called the ‘Democratic Priests’ and we worked tirelessly for the reconciliation of the Church and society through conferences and the publication of highly regarded books, despite the headwinds orchestrated by Freemasonry, which harboured a deep hatred for the Church and succeeded in harming it because its members had infiltrated the government. Their dirty work led to the separation of Church and State, the confiscation of the property of religious congregations, and their expulsion from France. Nevertheless, as in the early days of the Church, the persecutions only strengthened our determination to spread the work of the Sacred Heart throughout the world. Whilst making progress in establishing houses in Europe, we sent missionaries overseas, to Brazil, the Congo and later to Cameroon, Indonesia, South Africa and the United States. When I died on 12 August 1925, I had the joy

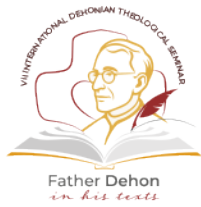
of seeing my sons already present on four continents—Europe, America, Africa and Asia—and it is a great honour for me today to know that they have extended their presence even to other countries where we were not yet present. We are not yet in Australia, but I am sure that this will be possible in the near future.

With the growth in membership, it became necessary to reorganise our order at certain times. In 1907, it was deemed appropriate to divide it into two provinces: the Western Province (French-speaking, but also including Italians and Dutch) and the Eastern Province (Germany and Austria). At the time, we were not yet in Germany due to the upheavals of the *Kulturkampf*. In 1911, the Dutch, whose numbers had grown, succeeded in establishing a province of their own. Far from causing dissension, this division served to strengthen the order and inspire the zeal of our confreres everywhere.

I am pleased to see the significant progress you have made since the Second Vatican Council with the renewal of the Constitutions. The General Chapters have debated major themes that take into account not only the growth of the Congregation, but also its diversification and enrichment through each of the entities where you are present. Among others: ‘We, the Congregation’, ‘Open Heart’, ‘interculturality’, ‘Ut unum sint’, ‘synodality’... Today you continue to commit yourselves to spreading the reign of the Sacred Heart across the various continents, and the new generation is no longer solely European. I am delighted to see Filipinos and Vietnamese carrying out missionary work in Europe, and Indians, Indonesians and Africans in North and South America.

To mark this jubilee, you have decided to make pilgrimages to certain places steeped in history, such as Saint-Quentin, the cradle of our Congregation, Quito, which was our first overseas mission; the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where many of our confreres gave their lives for their fidelity to Christ and the Gospel; and Yogyakarta, which brings back memories of my round-the-world journey in 1910. It was a great joy to me that my sons from Holland understood my wish to open the mission in Indonesia in 1923.

As you celebrate this jubilee, think of all the pioneers who went before you and who offer you inspiring examples of perseverance, humility, faith and self-sacrifice. You have them within your own communities as well as throughout the Congregation. As Herodotus, the Father of History as a science, wished, their memories must not be forgotten. Write about them for posterity, whilst inspiring the younger generations to be creative.



Congregation of Priests of the **Sacred Heart of Jesus**

VII Theological Seminar
Father Dehon in his texts
Taubaté, July 30 to August 4, 2026



Happy birthday to each of my sons, wherever they may be, and to the whole Congregation.

Your devoted servant, Léon Jean Dehon, from the Father's side.