

SCJ-CMR, DEHON'S FORMATION HOUSE: CELEBRATION OF THE 177^e BIRTH OF
FATHER DEHON

ARTICLE

THE DIFFERENT BIRTHS OF FATHER DEHON
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INTRODUCTION

The Congregation of the Priests of the Sacred-Heart of Jesus was founded in Saint-Quentin, in France, in 1878, by the venerable servant of God Leon John Dehon, who received the grace and the mission to enrich the Church by the institute apostolic of religious, living by his inspiration of the Gospel.¹ For him, it was the real way to follow Christ, to heal his wounds and to express his total abandonment and union to God in Christ through the Holy Spirit, the Blessed Virgin Mary our mother, Saint Joseph our protector and all the Saints. But, it was not easy for him because he faced many obstacles. The first was his family and mostly his father who really opposed his vocation and proposed to him a long journey (10 months), with the aim that Dehon could change his decision to enter the Seminary. Another salient difficulty was the suppression of the congregation on the 8 of December 1883. Thank God that after the suppression, Dehon's bishop, Mgr Thibaudier, had gotten for him, the permission to continue his works and the "bref laudatif"² of the 25th February 1888, which marked the first recognition of a Religious Institute, will be his consolation. The other difficulties were internal: Father Dehon had to do with his proper religious. However, in all circumstances, he knew how to pray and to trust in God, to express his "firmness and suppleness, conviction and availability"³ to the will of God.

In this article, we are not going to talk about the difficulties, activities or social life of Father Dehon, though our primary interest is his different births: physical, religious and heaven birth. As well, before the end of our work, we will talk, briefly, of the birth of the dehonians in Cameroon.

¹ Cf. *Rule of life or Constitutions of the Priest of the Sacred-Heart of Jesus*, n°=1 (my own translation. NB: it will be the same for all the quotations of this work.

² Cf. P. A. PERROUX, *Father Dehon, who are you?* (My own translation from *Père Deho, qui êtes-vous?*), Centro Generale Studi SCJ, Roma 2005, 129.

³ *Ibid.* 37.

I- PHYSICAL BIRTH

1) Dehon's family

Dehon's family was composed of Jules-Alexander Dehon (1814-1882) and Adele Stephanie Belzamine Vandelet (1812-1883).⁴ They gave birth to 3 children but one of them quickly returned to the Creator ("at the age of 4").⁵ Leo and his brother Henri became the only 2 children of their parents making a biological family of 4.

At that time, their great grandfather, Louis Hippolyte Dehon, was mayor in La Capelle.⁶ "The father of Leo... as well as his cadet brother... will occupy the same post"⁷ They were expecting Leo to occupy the same post too but he chose another way.

2) Birth of Leo Dehon

Leo Dehon was born on Wednesday 14th of March 1843, in La Capelle, "a small town of the department of Aisne, in the diocese of Soissons, in the North of France"⁸, a small village close to Belgium.

II- CHURCH BIRTH

1) Baptize birth

He was baptized 10 days after his birth, on the 24 of March (1843), in the parish church of La Capelle, by "M. Mécart",⁹ at the vigil of the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary. From there, he expressed his *ecce ancilia*: "I am the handmaid of the Lord, it might be done to me according to

⁴ Cf. P. A. PERROUX, 2005, 21.

⁵ Cf. H. DRRESTEIJN, *Life and personality of father Dehon* (my own translation from *Vie et personnalité du père Dehon*), H. Dessain – Malines, Romae 1959, 9.

⁶ Cf. H. DRRESTEIJN, *Life and personality of father Dehon*, 1959, 7.

⁷ Cf. Y. LEDURE, *Small life of Leo Dehon* (my own translation from: *Petite vie de Léon Dehon*), Desclée de Brouwer, Paris 1993, 17.

⁸ *Ibid.* 7.

⁹ H. DRRESTEIJN, *Life and personality of father Dehon*, 1959, 9.

your will.” And his *ecce venio*: “here I am Lord, I come to do your will”. Which were for him, the expression of his character of victim-priest: his way of sacrifice and total abandonment to the will of God. He used to celebrate, with confidence, the souvenir of that day (His Baptism).¹⁰ In fact, for him, “if God is for us, who can be against us?”¹¹

He received his confirmation on the 1st June 1857 during the celebration of the Pentecost feast day.

2) Priesthood and Religious birth

Since his youth time, Leo Dehon had one thing in mind: priesthood, though his father was not in accord with his idea. To convince his son, he proposed to him, a long journey to Patras, in Greece on the 7th of November 1864. At the end of that journey, Leo Dehon chose to go back home passing by Roma, where he arrived on the 20th June 1865. During his sojourn there, he met Pope Pius IX who proposed to him the French Seminary of Roma (Santa-Chiara) for his studies. In the family, the discussions were high but Leo Dehon finally left, on the 14 and arrived in Santa-Chiara on the 25 of October 1865. There, his life took another winding.

On the 22 of December 1866, he received “la tonsure.”¹² On the 23 and 26 of December, in the same year, he received the *minor's orders* (“porter, lector, exorcist and acolyte”).¹³ On the 21 of December 1867, he was ordained below-deacon and deacon on the 6th of June 1868. Then, on the 19 of December 1868, he received the priestly ordination in the Basilica of Saint John the Lateran, in Rome, and after some time, he was nominated to Saint Quentin Basilica, in France, as 7th curate. It is in that town that his life took another journey: the journey of satisfaction of hearts: his own heart and the Heart of Jesus.

¹⁰ Cf. P. A. PERROUX, 2005, 15-16.

¹¹ *Good News BIBLE*, (Rm 8, 31)

¹² *Ibid.* 47.

¹³ *Ibid.* 48.

In fact, this was where he met the Servants Sisters of the Heart of Jesus, in 1873.¹⁴ On the 28 of June 1878, feast day of the Sacred-Heart of Jesus, in the Oratory of Saint John's College, he made his religious vows in the hands of the archpriest sent by Mgr Thibaudier, his bishop (Soissons). He professed three vows: Chastity, Poverty and Obedience. Privately, he added the vow of "victim"¹⁵ which marked his total "abandonment"¹⁶ to the Heart of Jesus and or the real expression of his *Ecce venio* and *Ecce ancilla*,¹⁷ the fundamental elements of his Spirituality and or the Spirituality of the Congregation.

He specified that, that day marked THE BIRTH OF OUR INSTITUTE, The Oblates of the Heart of Jesus which became the *cosummatum est*,¹⁸ CONGREGATION OF THE PRIEST OF THE SACRED-HEART OF JESUS OF SAINT QUENTIN also call DEHONIANS.

III- HEAVEN BIRTH

1) Dead of Father Dehon

On the 12 of August 1925, at around 10minutes past 12, in Brussels, at the age of 82, he went to Heaven by saying: "for him I live, for I died". He said it by pointing the Heart of Jesus which he served all his life. He was a true disciple of the Sacred-Heart of Jesus through his spirituality and works. Anyways, for him, the Spirituality of the Heart of Jesus is the motor of the social life, motor of social action.

Today, Fr. Dehon still lives through the Institute, the works that he left and through his followers.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 67.

¹⁵ Cf. Fr. L. Dehon, *Spiritual Directories of the Priest of the Sacred Heart of Jesus* (my own translation from: *Directoire Spirituel...*), 1919, 4.

¹⁶ Cf. Y. LEDURE, 1993, 128-129.

¹⁷ Cf. Fr. L. Dehon, *Spiritual Directories of the Priest of the Sacred Heart of Jesus*, 4.

¹⁸ Cf. Y. LEDURE, 1993, 116.

2) A new birth of Fr. Dehon

A new birth of Father Dehon is calling us to follow the intentions of Pope which were, on the earth 2005, to proclaim ““Bienheureux” Father Dehon, present him as one of the servitors of the Gospel which the Spirit of the Sainthood continues to rouse in the Church of Jesus, to bring effectively into our world today, the Good News of love of our savior.¹⁹

In fact, the informative process of his beatification had been started in 1952.²⁰ In 1997, Pope John Paul II declared him venerable (Father Leo John Dehon). The process to his canonization was put in place. On the 19 of April 2004 the approval was received in the Congregation for the Sainthood. This was scheduled on the 24 April 2005 but the death of Pope John Paul II and some other problems delayed this up till date. Pope John Paul II, in fact, died on the 2nd of April 2005. As journey makers inspired by this noble saint; we pray that one day may come to the reality of his canonization.

IV- BIRTH IN CAMEROUN

1) The dehonian's birth in Cameroun

Father Dehon was also interested on missions. In 1888 he had got his first mission to Ecuador. In 1893 to the North of Brazil. In 1897 in Congo, 1898 in Tunis, 1910 in Canada, 1912 in Cameroon where the first missionaries arrived, in Douala, on the 30th of November. From Douala, they went to Kumbo (through Nkongsamba) where they arrived on the 31th of December. The next day, on the 01st January 1913, on the 1st Friday of the month, the day of the Sacred-Heart of Jesus, they celebrated their first Mass in the land of Cameroon: this day is celebrated as their birth day in Cameroon.

¹⁹ Cf. P. A. PERROUX, 2005, 3.

²⁰ H. Drresteijn, *Life and personality of father Dehon*, Romae 1959, 3.

2) Some dehonian's works in Cameroon

Since their presence in Cameroon, the dehonians are Evangelizing in almost the whole country. They carry out their evangelization work in the following areas of the country: Kumbo, Bamenda, Bafoussam, Foumban, Dschang, Nkongsamba, Douala, Yaounde and many others regions, towns, villages or places. They have constructed many parishes, schools, houses...

On the occasion of the celebration of their centenary in Cameroun, the sacred heart fathers constructed a Big Church in Bafoussam, where existing la JED²¹ which is helping the vulnerable youth of the locality. Moreover, they are constructing a refugee Centre in Douala. In September 2019, they opened a Big College in Nkongsamba. As far religious and priesthood is concerned, the Province has many communities and still creating some and has formation houses in Ngoya, Ndoundue and Ntasen, dehonians live amongst people and they are actively involved in the pastoral care of the flock under their care.

²¹ « Jeûnes En Difficultés »

CONCLUSION

The different births of Father Dehon are calling us to question our own births. He had a long life on earth. During his life, he was most interested in studies (4 doctorates, PHG, in civil law, philosophy, theology and canonical law). He was also interested in journeys (Europe, Proche Orient, North of Africa, Latina America, brief, a great tour of the World, frequently in company of his friend Palustre). He was “a man who in the heart of Christ had discovered the unity between a strong spirituality and an intense and surprising engagement in the society; a man who had lived by giving himself absolutely to God and to his human brothers, in authentic generosity, in firm perseverance”²², for the averment of the reign of the Heart of Jesus in the souls and in the societies. Our vocation, he affirm in the *Spiritual directories*, is: “the spirit of love and reparation to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the grace of the present time and of the future... We are answering the calls of our Lord at Paray-le-monial, to the inspirations of grace and to the conduct of the Providence. The goal of our Congregation is then to procure the glory of God, the glory of the Holy Trinity”²³ by a special and ardent devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which all the dehonians will try to console by repairing the offenses done to him and most specially, the one done by the souls that He mostly loved, by giving themselves to him as a victim to his good pleasure in the spirit of the reparation and love, in union with Mary, angels and saints, by their own sanctification, by the zeal to the salute of souls and by all their works which mostly yield to the predication and teaching, with the real interest to the distant missions which oblige generous sacrifices. So, “to his religious, as written in the Constitutions, Father Dehon expects them to be prophets of love and servants of reconciliation of men and the world in Christ.”²⁴ Thus, the Priests of the Sacred-Heart of Jesus are

²² Cf. P. A. PERROUX, 2005, 7.

²³ Fr. L. Dehon, *Spiritual Directories of the Priest of the Sacred Heart of Jesus*, 1.

²⁴ SCJ, *Rule of life*, n° 7.

engage to repair the sin and the lack of love in the Church and in the world, by offering to Christ the cult of love and reparation that his heart's desire. "There, said Christ to Marguerite Marie, is that heart which has too love men, and which does receive from the majority, and often from the one that he mostly love, only the coldness, the indifference, the ingratitude."²⁵ Is it not what we are doing to Christ today by our actions? At the end of his life, Father Dehon said: "I leave you the most marvelous of the treasures, it is the heart of Jesus."²⁶ What have we done of that treasure? Priest of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, what are we doing of that treasure, of that Sacred-Heart? Look around us. People are suffering. The Anglophone crisis is fragilizing people, touching them in their hearts and killing many others. What are we doing? Are we assisting their families? Are we supporting them? Are we with them? It is true that we cannot answer all these questions meticulously youbut we can globally say YES, we are with them, we are with you. Only our active presence among you can tell you more: we are receiving you, we are praying for you, we are praying with you. Some of you are eating the fruits of our hands. Some of you are frequenting our houses. That is why we can loudly proclaim: Anglophone people, francophone or Cameroonians, all people in the world, we are together. Just think about what is happening in "dehon's stadium" down there. Regularly, we are with you, talking, playing and enjoying some times. There, people are smiling, shouting joyfully, acting happily... which means that, despite the wickedness of crisis, people can continue alive, they can continue to live, have test of life and enjoying life. That is why we are with you, to show you that, in spite all trouble, we can continue expecting, trust in God, raise up our heads and look, confidently, at the pierced Heart of Christ from where we will receive medicine for all kind of suffering, solution for all problems and life, good life and continue life on the earth.

²⁵ P. A. Perroux, *Father Dehon*, 2005, 81.

²⁶ Cf. *Spiritual Testament of Father Dehon*.

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