

“For Him I Live, For Him I Die”

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1 *These were the last words spoken by Father Dehon on his death bed on August 12, 1925. In the pages that follow, they introduce the fifth part of a booklet entitled "Who Are You, Father Dehon?". This booklet was written by Father Tullio Benini to help the people of his parish, Christ the King, in Milan, in their reflection on Father Dehon. Father André Perroux has translated it and adapted it, in particular to extend this assistance to young French speaking people, notably in Francophone Africa.*

2 *The entire article is available on the Congregation's website: www.scj.org.*

3 In January 1925, starting the 45th notebook of his Journal, which in effect was to be the last, Father Dehon wrote: "This is the last notebook and perhaps the last year. Fiat!... My career has been accomplished, this is the twilight of my life... The ideal of my life, the vow which I made with tears in my youth, was to be a missionary and a martyr. It seems to me that this vow has been fulfilled. Missionary I am, through the hundred and more missionaries which I maintain in all parts of the world. Martyr I am, by the consequences which Our Lord gave to my vow of victim, above all from 1878 to 1884, for all the deprivations and the annihilations I have suffered up to the Consummatum est... " (NQT XLV/1925, 1, 2).

4 Father Dehon did not mistake in writing those lines which open the last stage of his life. He had only eight months left to live before leaving this earth.

25. THE LAST MONTHS

5 After the General Chapter of 1919 and the final approval in 1923, the organization of the Congregation was more assured.

6 At Father Dehon's side there was now Father Laurent Philippe as Assistant General ("They nominated the assistant whom I desired"). Father Philippe would be attentively present during Father Dehon's last days and would accept his legacy by succeeding him as Superior General.

7 The Founder bought a house in Rome and made it into the new motherhouse. "It seems that the Congregation is complete and getting organized. It has gone beyond my expectations. It is Our Lord who has done everything, I have only spoiled His work" (NQT XLV/1925, 14).

8 "I am the smallest and the most unworthy of founders, nevertheless I feel the need to unite myself with all founders. Their names come to me when I am praying: Benoît, Bernard, Francis, Dominique, Ignatius, Neri, Francis of Sales... don Bosco, Lavigerie, d'Alzon, Mother Veronica, Mary of the Sacred Heart. These great souls had a grandiose ideal: to win the world, to conquer the world for Jesus Christ. They prayed, suffered and worked for that... I unite myself daily to all these souls. I would like to raise my ideal to the height of theirs. I love Our Lord ardently and I would like to procure the Kingdom of the Sacred Heart... I am happy to have come to poverty, as others are happy to feel themselves property owners" (NQT XLV/1925, 2, 3).

9 He who had so much loved participating in the liturgy of the Church in its sacrament, he who had been so happy to raise altars for Jesus in His Eucharist, sees that now it is by his accomplishment, the liturgy of heaven, that he gladly finds himself "in union with the great mass of heaven": "I have been suffering from a sickness for some days... I no longer care for life. I long to depart this life and be with Christ ' [Phil 1:23]" (NQT XLIV/1923, 79).

10 On March 14, 1925, the year of the Jubilee proclaimed by Pius XI, Father Dehon was 82. He was happy to have been able to obtain Jubilee indulgences in the chapel in Brussels: "It was a real joy, a spiritual contentment. I am happy to gain all the indulgences of the Jubilee and to be purified of all my past faults" (NQT XLV/1925, 44).

11 His days in Brussels continued to move forward with the regularity of a clock. He got up at five o'clock, he celebrated mass at seven o'clock, he was present punctually at all the community's exercises of piety. Every morning he went to buy the newspapers: "I buy newspapers for the community, it seems a good thing that one should be up-to-date and in touch with contemporary history and have some subject for conversation"" (NQT XLV/1925, 15). He took short walks while reading a little book: *Recommendations aux prêtres* (Recommendations for Priests).

12 In June 1925 he wrote in his Journal: "For the feast of the Sacred Heart I have chosen this thought of Saint Margaret Mary for myself: Oh Heart of Jesus, I languish with desire to be united with you, to possess you and to lose myself in you, who are my eternal dwelling" (NQT XLV/1925, 63).

13 The last lines of his voluminous notebooks of Notes Quotidiennes (Daily Notes), at the time when the pen was soon to drop from his hand, still evoke his social action as an essential aspect of his work: "I receive fine letters from Monsieur Victor Berne, of Lyon. He reminds me of our ardent campaigns in 'Christian Democracy for Catholic social action in France. For some years I used to write the leading article in this excellent magazine. That was one of the forms of my social campaign blessed by Leo XIII (NQT XLV/1925, 66).

26. "FOR HIM I LIVE, FOR HIM I DIE"

14 July 1925. The city of Brussels was afflicted by an epidemic of gastroenteritis. Many members of the community were affected by this sickness. Father Dehon went to visit them and had a word of kindness for everyone. Then, on the August 4th, after the celebration of the Mass, he in his turn had to take to his bed. His general condition was relatively good and from his bed he continued to busy himself with the affairs of the Congregation, particularly with the preparation of the 9th General Chapter - the opening of which was anticipated for September 15th.

15 During his sleepless nights he prayed and offered his suffering for the Congregation. After repeatedly appraising all the individuals and the communities, he dictated his "desires and last wishes" to Father Philippe.

16 Around that time he got someone to get him a postcard to place near his bed. This card was a reproduction of the well-known picture by Ary Scheffer of Saint John resting on Jesus' breast. He often pointed out the postcard to his visitors and confided: "This is my everything, my life, my death, my eternity" (Fr. Philippe, *Lettres circulaires* (Circular Letters), 1:22).

17 Some brethren proposed to watch over him during the night. He told them: "Go and rest, do not tire yourselves". When being visited by his family and his friends, he asked them to excuse him "for not being able to offer them either refreshment or hospitality for the night" (Ibid., 1:16). Everyone around him was struck by his serenity, by the abandonment with which he bore his suffering: "I suffer from morning to evening and from evening to morning... The night becomes a spiritual communion 'Jesus is everything, He is the friend. Then bring me to you my Jesus'" (Ibid. 1:22ff).

18 August 10th was the day of his Assistant's Patron Saint: Saint Lawrence. Father Dehon asked someone to prepare flowers for his Assistant, to present his good wishes and to give him a gift.

19 On the night of August 11th, between 9 and 10 o'clock, he suffered a more severe attack. The doctors feared that the threat of death was becoming clear. In spite of this he remained completely lucid. His heart continued to be what it had always been: sensitive to friendship, rich in care and in solicitude for each and every one. August 12th was the feast day of St. Claire, this was

the Patron Saint of Claire Baume, a benefactress who was formerly under Father Prévot's spiritual direction and whom Father Dehon had subsequently advised for some years. He was now at the limit of his strength: in his trembling hand, which made his handwriting almost illegible, he once more reminded people not to forget to send good wishes to Claire Baume. These were the last words put down by someone who had written so very much: and they are still words of the most delicate and loyal attention.

20 Father Philippe suggested getting his usual confessor to come, but Father Dehon refused: "That is not necessary, you can hear my confession and give me absolution" On Tuesday Father Philippe asked him if he wished to receive extreme unction "Yes, yes, with all my heart" was his reply, and he clapped his hands in pleasure. Before receiving extreme unction, he renewed his vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. He added "of immolation", repeating these last words several times: "For that I need the same cross that I held in my hands then, give it to me".

21 During his last night, Father Dehon was alone with the Brother nurse whose father had died shortly before. Father Dehon showed him the drawer in his dresser where there was a beautiful rosary in engraved silver. He blessed this and, giving it to the Brother with a smile, he added "Do not say anything to anyone. Soon I will greet your good father in heaven" On all the above Cf. Fr. Philippe (Circular Letters, 1:11 ff).

22 On Wednesday morning, August 12th the cardiac crises became more frequent. The sick man entered his death throes about Noon. With an unmistakable gesture he reached his hand out towards a picture of the Heart of Jesus and in a clear voice he cried: "For Him I live, for Him I die".

23 These words would be his last words. At 10 minutes past 12 on August 12, 1925, Father Dehon, the Very Good Father, as he was known familiarly, finished his laborious day on this earth.

24 Among the documents which gather together his last wishes, Father Philippe found a sheet of paper with this heading "Pact with Our Lord. It was a writing which Father Dehon always carried with him.

25 "My Jesus, I make a vow - before you and your heavenly Father, in the presence of Mary the immaculate, my mother and of Saint Joseph my protector - to devote myself through pure love to your Sacred Heart, to consume my life and my strength in the work of the Oblates of your Heart, accepting in advance all the trials and all the sacrifices which you may be pleased to ask of me. I make a vow to give as the intention of all my actions pure love for Jesus and His Sacred Heart, and I beseech you to touch my heart, to inflame it with your love, so that not only do I have the intention and the desire to love you, but also the happiness to feel through the effect of your holy grace, all the affections of my heart concentrated on you alone".

26 There follows a Daily Renewal: "My Jesus, I renew with love the pact which I concluded with you. Grant me the grace to be faithful to it". And on the envelope, this invocation: "Lord, never cease to keep your precious friendship for your poor little disciple! Fiat! Fiat!"

27 If, as is probable, this pact of love goes back to the year 1878, the year of the foundation of the Congregation, it is a document of a unique and very great value. Father Dehon, by the grace of God, was faithful to this pact until his last breath. As he himself did so often, we can only proclaim: Yes truly, great is the love, great is the mercy of the Heart of Jesus!

28 The celebration of his funeral took place first in Brussels and then in the Basilica of Saint Quentin. The coffin was laid in the tomb of the Congregation in the Saint John cemetery of Saint Quentin, before being transferred later to the church of Saint Martin - a church which Father Dehon had built for the dioceses, and which is still entrusted to a Dehonian community.

27. THE MAJOR TRAITS OF HIS SPIRITUAL PERSONALITY

29 It was the Bishop of Soissons (1920 - 1927), Monsignor Henri Binet, who gave the oration at the time of the funeral in the Basilica of Saint Quentin. He began as follows:

30 "A page of great religious history has just been completed... To one of the XIX century's most eminent, most illustrious sons, the dioceses of Soissons... brings, through my ministry, the tears of mourning, the immense regrets, the homages, the infinite gratitude, above all the tribute of prayers, which are due to him for so many reasons". The bishop indicated some of these reasons: his social apostolate, his works accomplished in Saint Quentin, his immense contribution to Christian education. "Young people came to him with enthusiasm... Must it not be wonderful, above all for the heart, when one is loved in such a way? ... He has gone - the great old man with the eternally young heart, always trusting, always optimistic - to the eternal youth of Christ, to whose Heart he had been devoted...".

"A Man of Great Heart"

31 His friendliness, his nobleness of soul were recognized by everyone who came near to him. He was distinguished above all by an attentive, delicate goodness; full of understanding and solidarity, but at the same time intelligent and without weakness. Along with this there was the necessary lucidity and energy. He never took advantage of the slightest occasion to avenge himself on those who opposed him; for them he always knew how to find words of excuse or understanding.

32 "All his life he kept the spirit of a child. He always felt the deep sentiment which every child has of its impotence, of its need for help, and this was translated into his attachment to the person who welcomed him warmly. This is the reason for his exquisite gratitude with regard to those who desired to be of service to him. This is also the reason for which he learned to abandon himself, with eyes shut, to the Providence of God'.

33 It is thus that Father Dorresteijn started the portrait of "the man" who was Father Dehon (*Vie et personnalité... (Life and Personality...)*, p. 368), and he continues: "Since he is trusting, the child is naturally optimistic... Father Dehon remained optimistic through all the most difficult circumstances, the moment when men were most unfavorable to him". He then mentions the opinions of several witnesses. For example Monsignor Binet: "He was always young, always trusting, always optimistic". And again Father Kanters: "He had faith in men because he had faith in the efficacy of Providential action in the world". Father Philippe quotes the words of Father Dehon himself: "I have always been an optimist, I will die an optimist".

34 Not only did he always feel young in character, but even during his last years he kept the appearance of youth. "Youth seemed miraculously preserved in Father Dehon when he was an old man, in his supple gestures, in the vivacity of his glance, in the pronunciation and the enchanting inflections of his prayers, with his apt expressions and in his repartee". (Fr. Devrainne, Cf. Dorresteijn, p. 370). It is not entirely by chance if among the moments in which he was most happy, thus most free in his subject matter, he included the meetings of the Alumni Association of Saint John's, in which he faithfully participated over the years.

35 For him the story which really counts is the story of good. He was evidently alluding to human misery, he knew it only too well and he suffered for it; but this was most often in a general manner, in order to entrust the entire world, and himself first of all, to the sweet mercy of God.

36 His serene equilibrium was the fruit of a conquest which was at the same time a gift. This was the result of his persevering communion with the Heart of Christ and his basic attitude of making the positive aspect prevail in his relations with other people.

A Man of Great Faith, A Man of God

37 The goodness which characterizes Father Dehon, as also his other virtues, are all in close relation to his faith, understood in the biblical sense: the adhesion of one's heart and life to the living God, to the Heart of Christ. Every day he let the Word of God resound in him, with patience and perseverance he forced himself to put it into practice. His heart beat with the desire to make of his daily life an unceasing "response of love to love", "heart for heart".

38 It is in this way that his whole life was nourished by faith: with intensity and profundity. He had a spontaneous faith, without affectation, which shone out in all the aspects of his being, as man and friend, as priest, religious, educator, superior, organizer, apostle...

39 Those who met him found that his life of faith immediately gave them the strong impression of meeting a "man of God".

A Passionate Lover of the Heart of Christ and of the Eucharist

40 He made the spirituality of the Heart of Jesus his interior dwelling. From it he extracted the nourishment to feed his authentic mystical life and his apostolic activity.

41 Divine love is in the first place. God - Love called to man. And Father Dehon replied: "Yes, each one of us must be like a fiber of the Heart of Jesus, one which can only beat under the impulse of the beating of His Heart.

42 With Saint John, the Evangelist of the Heart of Jesus, he invites us to "contemplate that which we have pierced".

43 There is nothing surprising in the fact that the last words he spoke were: "For Him I live, for Him I die", when one remembers that this was a man who started his spiritual testament with the words: "My dear children, I leave you the most marvelous of treasures - it is the Heart of Jesus". Therefore, it should be no surprise that he placed all his works and his writings under the title of the Heart of Jesus; that he summarized his apostolic plan under this motto: "The Kingdom of the Heart of Jesus in Souls and in Societies"; and no surprise lastly if, for his religious profession, he chose the name of "John of the Heart of Jesus".

44 The contemplative gaze on the open Heart is the best foundation for truly responding to the love of God through our own devotion of love: a love which has nothing to do with insipid sentimentality, but which seizes the whole being - intelligence and heart, sentiments and energetic action -to work to transform the world, starting from the Paschal mystery of Jesus.

45 "Let us apply ourselves to loving, with a fervent, constant and freely-given love, he who is infinitely loveable... The love which the Heart of Jesus requires of us is a generous, faithful, devoted love, a strong and freely-given love which gives all its attentions to the service of the dearly beloved Master" (Circular Letters, October 17, 1893).

46 "The wound of the Heart of Jesus is an eloquent school of love. In contemplating it one is irresistibly won over by love, and one desires to love this beautiful love of compassion which at first melts the heart in infinite piety,

then raises it strengthened for total devotion" (*Études sur le Sacré Cœur de Jésus, 1ère partie, (Studies on the Sacred Heart of Jesus, First Part), Ch. III).*

47 We can thus understand in which sense Father Dehon was truly a man of the Eucharist. He speaks very often of this "mystery of mysteries" in his writings. But mostly he lived on it, for him it was the daily source which came to animate and make fecund his interior life and his action.

48 "In the Holy Eucharist there is the Heart of Jesus living, loving and wounded... It is there like the immolated Lamb on the altar to be offered to His Father and, at the same time, to receive our homage and our love... There is no doubt that it is this which must be the life of our houses and also the very sun, the hearth, the food and the remedy for our souls" (*Directoire spirituel (Spiritual Directory), V:5).*

49 He experienced the radiance of it during all his days, like the illuminating sun, like the fire which warms. "Nourishing oneself on God, drinking God, being incorporated in Christ... being nothing but one with Him..."

50 "The Eucharist is the hearth, the base, the center of all life, of all work, of all apostolate. The whole of redemption gravitates around Calvary, all its application gravitates around the altar. The evangelical worker who does not live on the Eucharistic life, has only words without life and ineffective action" (*NQT XXV/1910, 46, 47).*

51 That is why, in a completely logical way, Father Dehon invites us to unite "the offering of our heart to that of the divine Heart of Jesus for the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls..., as a perfect sacrifice of praise and adoration, of love and gratitude, of reparation, trust and abandonment to His holy will". "It is the great act of the day, it is the holocaust of perfect love and the reparatory sacrifice par excellence" (*Spiritual Directory, V:4).*

52 We receive lastly that important counsel which crowns his spiritual testament: "My last word will again be to exhort you to daily adoration... in the name of the Holy Church..."

Extraordinary in the Ordinary...

53 This expression well reflects that which was a characteristic of his lifestyle, of his holiness, that which numerous witnesses have placed above all else. His way of holiness never sought spectacular manifestations, never sought to be grandiose in appearance. Although he pronounced the "vow of victim", he preferred to gather the crosses - and there were to be many for him - which came from life, from events and from people. He did not seek them, nor did he provoke them: he thus received them from the hand of God. He had a disposition to a daily oblation of love, to live his days in abandonment to divine Providence.

54 He often repeated his Fiat!, that which, like Mary, Jesus left us in his Filial prayer - that which He lived every day, and above all at the time of His last struggle: "Be it done unto me according to thy word", "Thy will be done!". Father Dehon repeated this above all whenever vexations, health problems or fatigue came into his life. And he never ceased to advise people to give importance to "little things", to the daily duties of the community, of the family, of work, of fraternal relationships. "When all is said and done there are no big and small crosses, there is only a small and a big love... In any case, if we love greatly the Sacred Heart will come to us with its grace... communicating to us its strength and its joy..." (Deuxième Couronne d'amour, 1er mystère, 1ère méditation [Second Crown of Love, 1st Mystery, 1st Meditation]).

55 Simple, loveable and "knowing how to make himself loved", submissive and even dependent, he also knew how to be persevering and tenacious, coherent and firm in the choices which characterized his life: spiritual direction, the search for the will of God, trusting abandonment with regard to the future, Christian optimism towards and against all whatever happened, an intense contemplative life, an exceptional mastery of himself, a reciprocal action to the caring grace of delicacy and generosity, the gift of self in the service of the Gospel and in the service of his neighbor... To the point of heroism, he knew how to live the difficulty of pardon in silence and benevolence, in humility and in hope. He could well bear witness of the mystery of "reconciliation" in Christ: he lived it with his whole being.

56 On April 8, 1997, after the various canonical "processes", the Church, through the decree on the "heroism of his virtues", which is the last stage before beatification, declared Leo John of the Heart of Jesus, (Leo Gustave Dehon) Venerable.

57 In the official text of the declaration of the Holy See, one can read in particular:

58 "In the contemplation of the Heart of Christ he withdrew that which was considered a constant of his personality: a luminous goodness which gave him a particular charm, especially among young people... He was able to charm and win hearts... Rarely has a Superior been loved as he was; till the time of his death he was called the Very Good Father.

59 "The Cardinal virtues which contribute to giving equilibrium, harmony and assurance to the behavior of a person, found in him a temperament which was favorable to them. But circumstances, often very painful, of his long life, showed to what point the Servant of God was capable of taking advantage of them when, with prudence, with strength and equilibrium he faced the most complex situations...

60 "Born to a family which was comfortably well-to-do, he put his goods in the service of the Work at which the Holy Spirit had set him. Enterprising,

bold in his apostolic and social initiatives, he constantly gave proof of humble obedience, enlightened by faith, especially with regard to the Holy See, where he found for himself the security of doctrine and of life.

61 "The sweet light of the Virgin Mary constantly accompanied him. 'Long live the Heart of Jesus, through the Heart of Mary' - that was his salutation. He exalted his children to be united with (their Mother and their Guide in (their 'vocation of love and immolation', in particular through her participation in the sacrifice of her Son Priest, to be with Her chalices and channels of the water and blood which sprang from the open Heart of Jesus...".

62 This is certainly a fine inheritance for the Dehonian Family and for the Church too. Father Dehon himself never ceased to repeat how much this vocation counted among the most beautiful, and also the most demanding.

63 Preaching the "Month of Spiritual Renewal" to his young religious in Louvain in January 1909, he started as follows:

64 "We must enter further into the spirit of our Congregation. It is a very beautiful vocation. We must endeavor to have for Our Lord the same piety, the same devotion as did Saint John... Be a lover of Our Lord and be totally devoted to Him...". Inspired by Saint Gertrude he commented on the parable of the pearl of the Kingdom - this pearl, which is Jesus Himself, and for which we are called to sacrifice everything for the immeasurable gain of communion with God. He did not hesitate to say: "Our Congregation must be a Congregation of millionaires. Let us not squander our life! In the same way that the sun shining on stained glass gives its rays the color of the glass, so our actions in passing through the Heart of Jesus will be transformed by it".

65 Here below we can see in what terms Pope John Paul II reminded the Dehonian religious of this heritage when they were united at the General Chapter on June 14, 1985:

66 "More than a century has passed since the humble and hidden beginnings of the Dehonian Congregation. But the message and the charism of the Founder are always current, because the society of today feels even more the need to encounter the Heart of Jesus in order to find there peace, Serenity, comfort and pardon.

67 "Preach then the love of God ardently, presenting the Heart of Christ, symbol and center of this divine reality... To mankind, wounded by so many tribulations and interrogations, show in Christ crucified and resurrected the supreme certainty of the love of God!

68 "With particular solicitude and with the sense of the Church, watch over the apostolate of the press... Form Christian consciences in presenting with clarity the truths which must guide life... Be fully faithful to the magisterium and to the Holy See... Bear witness of your love of Christ in Eucharistic adoration... The work to be done is enormous, we cannot lose time".

28. A MESSAGE FOR US TODAY!

69 Father Dehon reminds us:

70 "The grace of God follows you, it urges you, it solicits you and takes on all forms in order to obtain possession of your soul and to light the fire of love. How many times does grace speak directly to your heart! It may be a light which illuminates you, it may be again a pious sentiment which touches you, or again a strong inspiration which leads you to love God, a disgust for the vanities which attract you..."

71 "It is necessary for love to overflow in our hearts... It seems that God is beside Himself for the violence of His love. Ah well! Let us not be afraid of being beside ourselves, of becoming mad for love for God... Let us give ourselves entirely, without reserve. Let us draw generosity from love. Let us return to the ineffable gift which God has made of Himself and of His Son, to the gift which the Son made of Himself. Let us read and reread this book of love which is love itself and when we are embraced with love, our oblation will easily be generous, prompt and without fail testis loved me and chose me. My apostolic vocation was born in His heart, thus it is there that it must be kept and develop, it is there that I must seek light, strength and all direction".

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