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LÉON DEHON, HIS SOCIAL AND POLITICAL VISION OF EDUCATION

Léon Dehon was, you might say, duped into becoming an educator. Blackmail is perhaps more accurate. In order for Léon Dehon to be able to start a congregation of priests, Bishop Thibaudier of Soissons gave him permission to start a congregation on condition that he start a school. As Léon Dehon says, “sous le couvert du collège”, the Congregation was founded. (NHV XII, 164) It was the origin of Collège Saint Jean, but also the beginning of the congregation. And it is in his capacity as the Director of the Collège Saint Jean that we now have a series of reflections of Léon Dehon on education. Each year, as long as he was the director of Collège Saint Jean, Léon Dehon gave the annual commencement speech. He would rush back from whatever meeting of the Cercle des Ouvriers or his other activities, to give the speech. If we wish to know what Léon Dehon thinks of education, that’s where we have to turn. But there is more. From 1886 until at least 1913 and again from 1919 to 1922, he also met annually with the alumni of Collège Saint Jean. Although the conferences were written by hand, not all of these reflections have survived the ravages of war and the politics of the laïcist government of France. Of some we have only scraps. But it is enough to connect us with his interest and concern with education.

So what does it reveal? Was he interested in education in the form of schools? It may be surprising to learn from João Carlos Almeida's doctoral dissertation on Dehon as educator that Léon Dehon was interested in education but not in schools. Léon Dehon's interest in education lies elsewhere.

This may not be very obvious from his commencement speeches at Collège Saint Jean.¹ There he mostly touches on curriculum: the instruments and methods of Christian education (1877), love of the fatherland (1878), the teaching of history (1882), and character education (1891). There is even a sort of ludic moment in his 1877 speech where Léon Dehon makes a comparison between the world of birds and the styles of education in schools for the young.² In 2012 Fr. João Carlos Almeida created a booklet of this comic interlude, with pictures of birds included.³ But curriculum never seemed to be at the core of Léon Dehon's interest. What he was interested in was the role of education in the social and political sphere. His vision of education is social: how to educate to the whole person in the historical moment of France in the last quarter of the 19th century.

Looking back to his work in 1921, he writes in "L'Aigle de Saint-Jean": "L'Aigle took on a small part in the social movement: it protested against the sacrilegious feasts of the centenary of Voltaire, it encouraged demonstrations in honour of Jeanne d'Arc, it refused socialism." And he adds: "These were delicious pages. ... [L'Aigle] encouraged us to work for the reign of the Sacred Heart in our dear France."⁴ The thread is typically that of Léon Dehon. For us it carries a code word, a key phrase: "the reign of the Sacred Heart."

¹ These speeches became part of the bulletin "L'Aigle de Saint-Jean" which began to be published on February 24, 1878. When during the war of 1914-1918 the meetings of the alumni were discontinued, Monsieur Leduc, one of the alumni and some others published interim accounts, called: "Trait d'union: Bulletin de guerre des anciens élèves de l'Institution Saint-Jean de Saint-Quentin." The motto of the group became "Monter sans fligner!" A. PERROUX, *Présentation du discours du 8 septembre 1907*, Dehoniana II (2002/1) p. 17-26.

² See J. C. ALMEIDA, "Um discurso inédito "Sobre a Educação" in *Léon Dehon e a Educação* (Studia Dehoniana 50, 2008), p. 201-228.

³ The unpublished text of the conference was found in the Archives of the Casa Generalizia in Rome.

⁴ "L'Aigle de Saint-Jean" Year 1, 1-2 p. 1-3. See A. PERROUX, « Présentation » p. 22.

Underlying Léon Dehon's reflections with educators, workers, or business people, is a vision. The vision is not seem at first to be spiritual. He does not talk about private virtues, the spiritual life or about personal relations. Léon Dehon's vision seems primarily social and political. But the code word "the reign of the Sacred Heart" tells us that his social and political discourses are part of his spiritual vision, part of his devotion to the Sacred Heart. So what we get are socio-spiritual messages to his beloved alumni.

Whereas, for instance, Hector Rigaud, the teacher of rhetoric at Collège Saint-Jean spoke at the beginning of the 1907 meeting about "the career of the Christian spirit," of a life of faith, charity and justice⁵, Léon Dehon began the body of his speech with the following remarks:

Why has *action catholique* had so few results? It is because we have remained all too long deeply attached to the respectable but peripheral traditions, to institutions that have fallen into desuetude and that we have not sufficiently sought to become aware of our social obligations.⁶

This language is deliberate. Léon Dehon was an ardent educator but for him education was to citizenship, to what he called social progress. He urged French Catholics to reject its attachments to the past and to enter with joy and enthusiasm into the new reality. As he said in the same speech, "Do not sulk against the century; don't put yourself outside of the modern movement."⁷ Despite the new ideology of *laïcisme* and the harsh repercussions of this ideology for religious communities, schools and other social institutions, Léon Dehon kept alive an enthusiasm for the possibilities that his time created. He was convinced that it was still possible to reverse the tide of history. "It is to Catholics," he said, "to recover the esteem, the trust, the affection of the dear people of France." But this was only possible, he said, if they do not "remain strangers to the social movement."⁸

⁵ André Perroux on Léon Dehon's "Discours aux anciens élèves de Saint-Jean" in *Dehoniana II* (2002/1) p. 27, footnote 1.

⁶ Discours aux anciens élèves, p. 29.

⁷ "Discours aux anciens élèves", p. 32

⁸ "Discours aux anciens élèves", p. 32.

Again and again, Léon Dehon came back to these themes. In the 1894 reunion on Christian truth, he charged his listeners not to be content with a religion lived in the private sphere. It is your mission, he said, to transform society. That's what the Church and society expect of youth: their task is to change society. The next year – in 1895: the twelfth encounter⁹ – Léon Dehon spoke of “jours meilleurs,” a hope for better days. This is surprising because Bishop Duval, his bishop, had forced him to leave Collège Saint-Jean and make it over to the diocese. One would never know from these speeches what was going on in the life of Léon Dehon at this time.¹⁰ He remains an optimist. He continues to believe that things can turn around in France: “I believe,” he said, “in the powerful direction of Leo XIII. He spoke in the midst of storms which darkened the horizon and his voice is like the wind from the north which chases away the clouds and makes the sun appear. The night of social errors is erased and the sun of justice and charity begin to shine again for this European society which unawares was moving in the direction of anarchy.”¹¹

From this, it is obvious what sort of educator Léon Dehon wanted to be. He wanted his words and his work to have an effect on France and its economic, social and intellectual path. “In the political order,” he said, “true freedom will kill a mendacious liberalism. In the economic order, justice and charity will kill unmerited misery and insolent monopolies; the spirit of association will put an end to individualism and the weakness of isolation; organized Christian democracy will kill the despotism of the lodges [of Freemasons].”¹² It is an utopian program, that, for us, is typically Dehon.

⁹ This speech can be found in *Dehoniana XXIX* (2000), p. 11-14.

¹⁰ In his Notes Quotidiennes of 1889 - 1890 he writes, however, »Périodes d'épreuves terribles... Des décisions venues de Cambrai nous condamnent vraiment à mort. » (NQT IV/1889, 95 r) He refers here to the demand of Bishop Thibaudier to join up with another older Congregation. A year later, he is told to leave the school: »Je commence mes préparatifs de départ. C'est un déchirement de cœur. Je l'offre à Notre Seigneur en esprit de pénitence et en sacrifice pour son œuvre... Il fallait d'ailleurs penser à laisser Saint-Jean. J'avais trop de choses, l'œuvre de Sacré Cœur m'absorbait. » (NQT V/1890, 17 r-v).

¹¹ L. DEHON, “Nous croyons à des jours meilleurs.” *Dehoniana XXIX* (2000) p. 13.

¹² L. DEHON, “Nous croyons...” p. 13.

Léon Dehon's social theory

So what are we to make of all of this? It is not to these discourses on education that we should turn to find an answer. For that we must turn to the texts in which Dehon speaks more directly about his social theory. These are found in the periodical *La règne du Sacré-Coeur dans les âmes et les sociétés* which Dehon founded in 1889.¹³ In these contributions, Dehon's social theory and vision is more clearly articulated. He shows himself to stand within a long Christian theological tradition which consciously thinks of theology within an explicit social theory.

We should not expect, however, to find in these writings a fully contextualized political or social theology in the line of St. Augustine's *De civitate Dei*.¹⁴ Léon Dehon's underlying theological vision was never so explicit nor as daring. Yet, unlike so many theologians of the 20th and 21st century where the social, political or historical context is barely detectable, Léon Dehon's social narrative is explicit even though the underlying theological vision of the world remains hidden. He is not – as has been often repeated – an innovative theologian. We should not expect to find a style of political theology such as in our time we have found in Liberation Theology or of the political theology of Johann Baptist Metz or John Milbank.¹⁵ He remains a passionate pastoral theologian whose devotion to the Sacred Heart was imbued with a political and social outlook. However, he did not see them as part of the great movements of history. He was too close to the initial events of modernity to see the great change of mentality that the previous two centuries had wrought.

¹³ S. TERTÜNTE, *Léon Dehon und die Christliche Demokratie: Ein katholischer Versuch gesellschaftlicher Erneuerung in Frankreich am Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts*. Freiburger theologische Studien (Freiburg : Herder, 2007); S. TERTÜNTE, « Glanzzeit und Ende einer Karriere in der christliche Demokratie: Léon Dehon im « Fonds Tiberghien » (Lille) », *Dehoniana* 2002, p. 91-106.

¹⁴ *The City of God against the Pagans*. Translation by R. W. Dyson. New York : Cambridge University Press, 1998. 2006); Paula Fredericksen, *Sin, The Early History of an Idea*, Princeton U: NYRB Dec 20/12:70-76.

¹⁵ J. MILBANK, *Theology and Social Theory : Beyond Secular Vision* (Malden, Oxford, Carlton: Blackwell Publishing 1996 / 2006).

Léon Dehon still thought that it was possible to turn back and to recover what to him was lost.¹⁶ In our view, although he attached himself to the movement of the Abbés democrats and quickly underwrote the orientation of Leo XIII *Rerum Novarum*, he remained too trapped in the immediacy of political events to give a theological interpretation of his time.

His view remained pastoral. In the Congregation we have connected this pastoral spirit with the oft-repeated slogan: “Leave the sacristies... to the people!” This attraction to the fringe – to the people beyond the sacristies, actually the unsophisticated, “simple” *peuple* – was intimately linked with his devotion to the Sacred Heart. He had taken to heart Margaret Mary’s a social complaint of the Sacred Heart devotion: the social indifference to the love and oblation of Christ. From the beginning, this devotion had a social and political intent. Did not Margaret Mary sent a letter to the king of France to have the Sacred Heart engraved on all the military standards?¹⁷ As Menozzi reminds us in his insightful book, *Sacro Cuore*, Léon Dehon was the first to make this social, political connection between the devotion to the Sacred Heart and social theory explicit.¹⁸ The devotion comes forth out of a complaint: why has the love of God, this total self-giving, total self-humiliation for the other of God, met with the indifference of modern culture? Why is this love of the Heart of Jesus not the grounding vision of all social and political life? Dehon’s work of reparation became an attempt at civilizational transformation.

¹⁶ It manifested itself, for instance, in his social and economic analysis of the influence of Freemasonry and the Jews in France. On the part of his theology, it is clear that Léon Dehon was not influenced at all by the regressive turn in the theology of the 1870s to neo-Scholasticism or neo-Thomism.

¹⁷ The intent of the letter of Margaret Mary to the king of France was to dedicate the nation to the Sacred Heart as an expression of the return to a Christian state. When Dehon realized that this was not possible any more, he saw the transfer of the power from the king to the people. It meant that nation was broken up for him into corporations and groups and it was to them that the citizens ought now to give their devotion. OSC VI/ 1895, p. 510. This becomes a central focus of the devotion to the Sacred Heart. See S. TERTÜNTE, *Léon Dehon und die Christliche Demokratie*, p. 118-121.

¹⁸ D. MENOZZI, *Sacro Cuore: Un culto tra devozione interiore e restaurazione cristiana della società* (Roma: Viella, 2001).

His “education” was at heart a practical theology of liberation for workers and their families from the destructive processes of the industrial revolution and political liberalism, for him forever linked to the social reign of the Sacred Heart.¹⁹

If such is the case, allow me to draw some conclusions from this.

1. We cannot repeat Léon Dehon’s social theory today. Léon Dehon’s social and political theory is too French, too integralist, too restorationist. We acknowledge that Léon Dehon’s social, political theory was not innovative; it is too near-sighted. He reflects the social theory of his time, shifting his perspectives when urged to do so by reality itself or at the urging of Pope Leo XIII. As such, his vision is often reactionary – a throw-back to a time prior to the French Revolution, an ultramontane position with regard to the role of the pope in European politics, aristocratic in his relation to workers. For our taste, Dehon is too much a French patriot with an idealized view of France as the first daughter of the Church. There is a lot to be critiqued about Dehon’s social and political vision.²⁰
2. However, despite its deficiencies, Léon Dehon’s social theory as an outflow of the devotion to the Sacred Heart is and remains part of our legacy. His sense of a need for reparation in the social context is too strong for us to neglect it. He clearly meant to apply this vision not just to lay people, but also to his religious. Many first members got their introduction to this social spirituality with Léon Harmel in Val-des-Bois. That despite strong

¹⁹ OSC V2/1898, p. 109.

²⁰ Dehon’s intent was to have Christ reign in societies, families, laws and morality, often with a view of having an integral political, religious cohesion in societies. The underlying perspective was an idealized understanding of the social and religious cohesion of the Middle Ages or the time prior to the French Revolution. See S. TERTÜNTE, *Léon Dehon und die Christliche Demokratie* especially p. 98-121.

opposition by the group around p. Blancal in the 1890s²¹. We have not always remained true to this. This spiritual vision of the every-day life where we are asked to stand in the messy ambiguity of the social, economic and political life is also what we wish to take into our next General Chapter. We must take seriously the call of Léon Dehon to go beyond the sacristies. This spiritual vision must not be lost sight of at the practical level in our formation, but also in our theoretical formation in philosophy and in our theological education here in Stadniki.

Theological education, along the lines of Léon Dehon, must be a type of political or social theology. Our theology is not complete without a thorough understanding of the social doctrine of the Church, which today must be placed within the new global situation of post-modernity. For Dehonians the spiritual and the political/social must be thought together.

But it also applies to other parts of theology. Pope Francesco has asked that our praxis of theology but also our thinking starts at the periphery, at the fringe. As Dehonians we immediately felt a great affinity to this call. There is a way of thinking in theology that starts from the bottom, that opts primordially for the poor, that takes seriously the every-day reality of people, that operates with mercy and compassion. We know this also of Jesus. His ministry right from the start was with little folk who felt the oppression of scribes and Pharisees and the Roman occupation, the sick, the excluded. Dehon's uniqueness is how he saw, right from the start, the neglect of the Church in its failure to reach out beyond the established parish. The complaint I heard in Poland in my four years as councilor is about the loss, the drifting away of

²¹ This happened particularly in the chapters of 1893 and 1896. In a letter Fr. Blancal wrote to Fr. Dehon in 1897 – thus after the challenge to Dehon's continued leadership in the Congregation at the 1896 Chapter – he accused Dehon of being interested in all the great questions of the time. Of this he says, "This has nothing to do with the aim of the Congregation which is a special cult of love and consolation towards the Heart of Jesus as a means of a quick and powerful sanctification." But Dehon continued on the path that he had chosen.

people, from the Eucharist. What better challenge to give yourself than to follow the example of Dehon when he began in Saint-Quentin and when he connected with the workers in France in search of the lost.

3. Dehonian spirituality, we know, is deeply Eucharistic. One of our central acts is adoration. Too often we forget that the Eucharist – and, as a consequence, adoration – is a deeply political act. The Eucharist is a covenant feast of God with humanity – a celebration anticipating or foreshadowing the eschaton of God with a redeemed humanity. We enact symbolically the final fulfillment. This fulfillment is not my personal resurrection alone; it is the final gathering of all God's people. As a baptized and redeemed people we pull this final reality into today's lived, finite, unfulfilled reality and allow its force to weave its way through history. There is in fact no greater political act in our often chaotic, unjust, violent society. As Dehonians we spend at least one hour each day interacting with this power of God. It cannot be that we leave this *dunamis* in our chapels and churches and do not make it radiate among people.

Education in a Dehonian way? Léon Dehon gave us an enormous challenge. In its recent history Poland has suffered from a utopian socialist or communist theory of society and is perhaps innately suspicious of a political theology. But it can't do without. Polish catholic life would wither into insignificance. The same is true for us Dehonians. Without Dehon's social vision the Congregation becomes indistinguishable from those whose pastoral, parochial work Léon Dehon said he detested for himself because it never went beyond the sacristy.

In our next chapter, we are asked to re-enter into the charism of Dehon not only as an interior life but also as one that binds us inextricably with the peripheries, with the poor. It asks us to reflect how our communities can become the places where we bring together the personal and the social. Hence my wish for you today: May we become ever more educators in the way of Dehon.

Summary

When speaking about Léon Dehon as an educator, the first thoughts go to him as the initiator of Collège Saint Jean in Saint Quentin in 1877. Although his first idea as a founder was not to found schools, he had a deep attachment to its students and the alumni. It is in his annual commencement addresses and in his annual presentations for the alumni association from 1883 on that we derive his understanding of education. If we are to typify Léon Dehon as an educator it would be mainly as a social-political educator. Léon Dehon was passionate to turn France around toward more Christian ideals in the social and economic sphere in the laïcist political scene in the latter part of the 19th century. The presentation gives an insight into Léon Dehon's social concerns of this period also as an indispensable part of his charism for the Congregation he started at the same time as the Collège Saint Jean.

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