

The story behind a story

It was already way past midnight. In the editorial office all had left; he was all by himself. The lights in the other offices had been turned off already for a long time. Only the soft humming noise of the cooling fans of the many computers which were still on, broke the silence. He leaned back in his office chair and let out a sigh. “Will I ever understand you” went through his head? Already for days he had been working on a story of a 19th century French founder of a religious community. The information gathered from the Internet was quickly dispatched. He had also worked through a few of the available biographies – almost exclusively written by well-meaning members of his community.

The barebones history of Leo Dehon is all there. He could have written it at the beginning of the week: a middle-class son of rich parents throws himself into the social issues of the 19th century, gets mixed up with politics, founds a community of similar-minded people, has to endure many setbacks from other ecclesiastics and confreres, becomes visibly more settled around the turn of the century, survives with his community the first world war and dies at an old age. It was an entirely exciting life, easy to write up into good story. But, then again, not as sensational a story as was Francis of Assisi’s, Gandhi’s or Martin Luther King’s. From the beginning what fascinated him was the fact that so many thousands of people across generations were attracted until today to join his community. It did not look as if that was going to end soon. Of course, it was also clear to him, that not all entered the community out of pure enthusiasm for Dehon. And yet: he created a movement which a hundred years later was still going. At home during supper he had told his girlfriend about him. And she – typically – had asked a question which would not leave him: “Why did he do all this?”

At first he had thought – naively – that reading Dehon’s writings could give him an answer. But a cursory glance at his bibliography made him realize that it would not be of much help. Not that the foreign language and spirituality of the 19th century would cause him difficulties; he was somewhat of a specialist in the ideas of this time and not easily put off. But when he saw the list of countless books, conferences and letters, he gave up on the idea. In his private and professional life there were, of course, also other themes ... Neither – so he was told by the central administration of the community – was there anywhere a small ten-page exercise book, in which, on his part, Dehon had written decisively what had moved him so deeply that he could move so many others. Of course, in Pierre’s head the usual words surfaced: “God” or “faith”... but they didn’t do it. He wanted to know, how did God “feel” for this man and what kind of faith had exactly put him on the track that he then followed. It was clear to him, that he was being quite insolent in his quest. Would he allow a stranger to look so deeply into the bowels of his own life? Oh, well, he thought with a smile, may be a hundred years after my death!

However, then there had come another letter from Rome. “They could,” so they wrote, “give him no all-inclusive, authoritative text on the faith experience of the Founder, but there was a dossier containing texts of Dehon in which he interpreted his most favorite scriptural text which even today was given a special place in the foundational document of the community, the Constitutions.” Pierre had debated with himself and prayed for help. Clearly he could not write a theological dissertation, but perhaps he could give a foretaste of the source of the water from which had developed since then a multi-year stream.

By now he had already been bent over this dossier of texts for several hours after work. There were one hundred and ten of them. All had to do with only two verses from Paul’s Letter to the Galatians:

*For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*¹

Pierre felt that he had read enough. He closed his eyes. Not just to relax, but to hear which words beyond the statistics stuck with him the most. The echo was clear: “*He loved me.*” From all sides the phrase resounded in him. The texts were about nothing else. He turned back to the texts: more than fifty times Dehon had turned to this sentence. “*He loved me*” – it sounded like the refrain of Dehon’s life. He had repeated it in countless variations. Without a doubt it was the most important experience of his life.

*He loved me and gave himself for me (Gal 2.20). He loved me to the point of taking our human nature to become my brother, my security, my Redeemer. He loved me to the point of becoming my teacher by his examples, his discourses, his parables.*²

Always again “*He has loved me.*” He must have been a human being full of desire, Pierre thought, full of desire to be loved. And obviously he was someone who had had this experience. For from the pages he had read he had heard again and again astonishment, enthusiasm and joy. These described what existed between God and Dehon: “*He has loved me.*”

Pierre opened his eyes again and looked at the row of pictures that he had put beside his computer screen on the wall separating his cubicle from the next one. They were pictures of Dehon which he had pulled from the Internet and had printed. When he wrote stories about people, it was important to have them directly before one’s eyes. His eyes fell upon a portrait of Dehon in his last year. It showed an old man, snow white hair, glasses, and through eyes looking directly at the onlooker, quiet, perceptive, unobtrusive. But above all, there is this unmistakable smile on his face. “Dehon smiling.” How appropriate! A smile and a friendliness radiated from the photo. Right on, Pierre thought. It was not a desperate desire; it was a desire fully lived, this “*He has loved me.*”

Pierre had a strange feeling of kinship with this man, long dead. He turned off his computer, turned off the light in the editorial office and drove home in the darkness of the night.

After work the next day Pierre stayed in the office once again. He was deeply satisfied to have found the refrain that went through Dehon’s life, at least according to the texts of his favourite scripture quote. But Pierre wanted more than a refrain. He wanted full verses. He wanted a fuller contour. A word like love you can hear every ten minutes on the music channel he liked to listen to. And with a glance at a picture of himself and his girl friend, he knew what it meant to speak of love. But what about the love which Dehon had found, which he named Christ? The answer came from a source which in reality had nothing to do with the texts from the Galatian dossier, as Pierre had begun to call it. Even before he had sought in the texts for the way that Dehon described this love of Christ, certain scenes of Dehon’s life from the biographies came to mind: his concern for youth as a chaplain in Saint Quentin, his interventions for the rights of workers, for a just order in society... All these, Peter was convinced, he did not because it was a duty or an ideology. It had to be out of a reflex of love which Dehon had experienced in Christ, a mirror, a continuance ... Was that the meaning which Dehon gave to the phrase: “...*he gave himself for me?*”

¹ 2.19-20.

² OSP III/460

The Heart of Jesus, the love of Jesus, that is the whole Gospel. Jesus came upon earth out of love for his Father and out of love for us. The Gospel – the very life of Jesus – is the story of this great manifestation of love which lasted thirty-three years... One need not look for anything else in the Gospel than the love of Jesus, from his incarnation until his death... The Son of God has loved us to the point of giving his life for us (Gal 2.20). The Word became flesh. It is out of love for us. ... He lived in poverty and work: it was always out of love. He preached; he healed the sick, consoled the afflicted, organized his Church: it was always out of love for us. And having loved us always, he loved us even more, if that is possible, at the end of his life (John 13.1), by suffering, by dying for us³.

Pierre stopped short his reading. He realized that he had reached an impasse. Apparently for Dehon it went far beyond the love of his Lord for him. It was about suffering, about dying. Pierre recalled the many images of the cross that he knew from churches, along the road, in houses. Gruesome images of a violent death. He had never liked them. They turned him off. It was foreign to him to find something positive in all of this. Obviously, for Dehon, it was different. For him, a living out of love included a dying out of love. *“It is at the foot of the cross where I love to meditate on the mystery of salvation.”⁴*

Once more, Pierre went through the citations of the Letter to the Galatians which had been sent him from Rome. The refrain *“he has loved me,”* he now knew, must be understood together with *“he gave himself for me,”* a facet of love, which Dehon had found in his Lord. Above all, Dehon appeared to use the words Christ – Love – Sacred Heart almost as synonyms.

His eyes fell once more upon the pictures beside his computer. On one of them Dehon was pictured as an old man, hands folded, on a kneeler. His eyes are steady, fixed on an image of Jesus, a few centimeters from him. At the eye level of Dehon is not the face of Jesus, but his heart, painted as radiating. There was nothing else in the picture, only the two of them, in total silence, a real you and you encounter. This intimacy reminded Pierre of a text of Dehon on the Letter to the Galatians:

Make your dwelling in my heart, you will live from the life of a God-Man. It will no longer be you (Gal 2.20). Only one heart: that is the ideal of union. You will do everything with me. In this union you will find joy and strength.⁵

Forty times – Pierre had counted them – Dehon had cited this text and commented on it: *“It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me”⁶* That was much more than just being in front of the other, as in the picture. Dehon himself had not used the word communion to describe his relation to Jesus but the word *union*. Pierre was surprised. With the word union Pierre thought foremost about himself and his girl friend, also about eroticism. Indeed with Dehon the relation to Jesus has also something deeply intimate about it: friendship, familiarity, intimacy. These words appeared time and again: *“a relationship so tight and so familiar that it seems that the external man as well as the*

³ OSP 5/447

⁴ NQT 1/376

⁵ RSP 20

⁶ Gal 2.20a

*internal man has not other life than that of Jesus Christ: I live, or rather, it is not I who live but it is Jesus Christ who lives in me (Gal 2.20).*⁷

This was an absolutely foreign world in which Pierre found himself. He found a certain resistance in himself: What would be left for a human being who so gives of himself, who so surrenders himself to others? And what has this to do with love that another takes full possession of me? Did Dehon have such a bad self-image that he must give himself up? Pierre was well aware that these were his thoughts and his misgivings, not those of Dehon. Once again, in looking at the Galatians citations he hardly found any indication that Dehon despised himself. It seemed much more important to him that through this union he might become a new human being: “Clothe yourselves with Jesus Christ, clothe yourselves with the new self (Eph 4.24). *You must take from Jesus his feelings, his words, his luminous life... I live now not I, it is Christ who lives in me.*(Gal. 2.20)”⁸

Of course, Pierre thought, the perspective of Dehon as a result of this union is quite positive: having a share in love. It did not appear to him at all that for Dehon this ended up in sentimentalism or as if Dehon wanted to a private room of love in which there was place only for him and the Lord. His life and his work spoke clearly of a different order as did the life and the work of Jesus. You had to give it to Dehon: Union yes, a new human being yes, but not only built on sentiments but in thinking and certainly in acting – and for the other. And again as a commentary on the Galatian refrain, Dehon writes:

*This divine charity calls forth in us a double love: the love of recognition for God, the love of devotion for the neighbour who is so dear to God. This double love is the source of greatest social and economic benefits. Let us get to know it.*⁹

However, how for God’s sake, Pierre asked himself, could one enter into this union, so often mentioned by Dehon? It did not just fall from heaven! Once more Pierre looked at the picture of the silent togetherness of Dehon and the plaster statue of Jesus with the opened heart.

*Let us follow Jesus. Let us get behind him by contemplating him, by imitating him, by ceaselessly letting ourselves be inspired by the sentiments of his Heart: Let the same mind be in you as was in Christ Jesus. (Phil 2.5) If we seek him, if we serve him, if we love him, it would not be senseless. He will become more intimate in us; he will make his home there and take everything into his care. He will live in us.” (Gal 2.20)*¹⁰

In the final analysis, for Dehon it was obviously not his desire for this intimate relation, it was this view of the whole life journey of Jesus; it was this huge trust that also this Jesus desired this togetherness. But on every page of the Galatian dossier it was clear, that in the end it was Jesus himself who offered him this union.

At last Pierre took a final look at the conclusion of his story about Dehon. It was an obituary written by Georges Goyau a few days after the death of Dehon. Goyau was not a confrere of Dehon, but a

⁷ OSP 5/362

⁸ MND, p. 720

⁹ OSC IV/650

¹⁰ OSP 4/183

socially active Catholic intellectual who had worked with him. Pierre had found the quote right away as a suitable conclusion to his article. After all he had experienced about Dehon in the quote from the Letter to the Galatians, the words of Goyau seemed to fit beautifully the life of the Founder.

*I can still hear Fr. Dehon, at this time, in Val des Bois, develop for young seminarians and young lay people the great lines of thought of the pope's teaching and to draw from the teachings what would consume their energies. Austere was his posture and rigorous his theology. But as soon as he spoke, there flowered upon his lips this tenderness of soul which was fueled by his daily meditations, by his constant contemplation of another tenderness, the tenderness of the God-man. He was above all, as a social apostle, the disciple of the heart who had had mercy.*¹¹

¹¹ La Libre Belgique, 9.11.1925, AD Inv-Nr 0068406