

“Do Canadians Really Have Religion?”

The Mission of the Priests of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Alberta (1910-40)

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Abstract This article examines the mission of the Priests of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (Dehonians) in Alberta. It traces the mission’s development from difficult beginnings to its progressive crisis. It also considers the practical challenges of pastoral work among scattered, multilingual Catholic communities, and the pressure exerted on religious vocation by life in a markedly secularized and utilitarian society. The article concludes by analyzing why the mission failed to consolidate a stable Dehonian presence in Alberta.

Keywords Catholic missions. Alberta. Canada. Religious congregations. Priests of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Summary 1 A Late Missionary Commitment. – 2 At the Origins of the Mission: Dehon and the French Canada. – 3 An Anti-Protestant Mission? – 4 The Establishment of the Mission. – 5 Difficulties and Crisis of the Mission. – 6 Reasons for Failure: Religious Vocation and the Frontier Society.



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1 A Late Missionary Commitment

When it was founded in 1877, the Congregation of the Priests of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (better known as the ‘Dehonians’) had no particular vocation for missionary work. Its founder, the French priest Léon Dehon (1843-1925), pursued his ecclesiastical studies in Rome under the pontificate of Pius IX in the years immediately preceding the end of the papacy’s temporal power, thereby acquiring a solid Roman and ultramontane formation.¹ Upon returning in 1871 to his diocese of Soissons, in northeastern France, Dehon was appointed to the industrial city of Saint-Quentin as chaplain of the main parish. There he became actively involved in social and educational initiatives, establishing an association for working-class youth (the Œuvre Saint-Joseph, 1872) and a secondary school for the urban bourgeoisie (the Institution Saint-Jean, 1877).² He also became the confessor of a group of Alsatian nuns, the Sisters Servants of the Heart of Jesus. Through their charismatic superior, Maria Ulrich, he was introduced to the spirituality of the Sacred Heart; under her influence and guidance he resolved to embrace religious life and to found a congregation of priests.³

The institute was conceived with a distinct spiritual identity, centered on love and reparation to the Sacred Heart.⁴ The first Constitutions, approved by the bishop of Soissons in 1885, stated that the purpose of its members was to procure “la plus grande gloire de Dieu par une dévotion spéciale au Sacré-Cœur qu’ils s’efforcent de consoler en réparant les injures qui lui sont faites, et en s’offrant à lui comme victimes”.⁵ The fathers were permitted to run schools and seminaries and, more generally, to undertake “œuvres qui sont compatibles avec leur vie de réparation”, but they were not to assume “ministères qui les tiendraient éloignés de leurs résidences communes”.⁶

Although missionary engagement did not rank among the congregation’s priorities – and was never explicitly mentioned in the Constitutions – Dehon did not rule it out.⁷ As early as April 1881, in a conference addressed to the novices, he stated that the congregation

1 Sandoni, “Dall’ultramontanismo alla romanità”, 137-54.

2 Ledure, *Le père Léon Dehon*, 59-73.

3 Ledure, *Le père Léon Dehon*, 75-101.

4 Denis, *Le projet du père Dehon*, 2-21; Denis, “Les essais de prêtres-victimes”, 91-129.

5 *Constitutions de la Société*, 1.

6 *Constitutions de la Société*, 5.

7 On Dehonian missionary engagement, see Tessarolo, *Il padre Dehon e le missioni*; Neuhold, Tertünte, “La missione come fattore”; Neuhold, *Mission and Church*, 69-128.

would one day undertake missions.⁸ The following year he wrote to Pope Leo XIII that his priests, “puisant dans le Cœur de Jésus l’esprit de sacrifice, [seraient] heureux d’être aussi bientôt représentés dans les missions, mais particulièrement dans les pays où la foi est depuis longtemps obscurcie par le schisme”, since the priestly reparation to which they were devoted constituted “un des premiers moyens de régénération” for such lands.⁹ This interest in missionary activity was consistent with Dehon’s social engagement and his desire to contribute to the establishment of the Social Kingship of Christ – that is, to the re-Christianization of contemporary society¹⁰ – a commitment that, in the last years of the nineteenth century, led him to become a prominent advocate of Leo XIII’s social teaching¹¹ and a leading figure in European Christian democracy.¹²

This interest also responded to specific needs for institutional consolidation and legitimation.¹³ As Dehon wrote to his bishop in December 1885, “on aime beaucoup à Rome les congrégations qui demandent des missions”,¹⁴ and he was keenly aware of the importance of gaining credibility in the eyes of the Holy See. Indeed, the congregation had faced significant difficulties in its early years. In December 1883, the Holy Office ordered its dissolution, condemning as false the alleged supernatural revelations on which its foundation was claimed to rest, and allowed its reconstitution in March 1884 only with significant reservations.¹⁵ For many years thereafter, both the institute and its founder were regarded with suspicion in Rome. Missionary activity was therefore expected to dispel these doubts and demonstrate the congregation’s solidity and usefulness to the Church at a time of renewed Catholic missionary zeal.¹⁶

Moreover, by the 1880s the Dehonians had begun to expand beyond France,¹⁷ attracting new members in Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Germany, and later also in Italy and Poland. This

8 Falleur, *Cahiers*, vol. 5 (1880-81), 70, in AD, B. 6/2, Inv. 36.01: “Nous aurons des missions”.

9 *Letter from Dehon to Leo XIII*, February 1882, in AD, B. 37/4, Inv. 655.01.

10 On the relationship between devotion to the Sacred Heart and the doctrine of the Social Kingship of Christ, see Menozzi, *Sacro Cuore*, 107-240 and especially, on Dehon’s positions, 188-97.

11 Ledure, “*Rerum novarum*” en France; Ledure, *Catholicisme social*.

12 Tertünte, *Léon Dehon*.

13 Neuhold, Tertünte, “La missione come fattore”, 4-5.

14 *Letter from Dehon to Odon Thibaudier*, 21 December 1885, in AD, B. 21/3R, Inv. 373.04.

15 Ledure, *Le père Léon Dehon*, 103-32.

16 Ferlan, *Storia delle missioni cristiane*, part 4.

17 Neuhold, *Mission and Church*, 369-70.

growth created increasing tensions with the diocesan authorities of Soissons, who were wary of the congregation’s internationalization and feared losing control over it.¹⁸ Dehon, however, aimed to move beyond the original, limited diocesan framework, transforming his institute into a pontifical congregation, directly subject to Rome and thus fully international. Missionary activity was instrumental in achieving this goal, as it enabled the congregation to reach a global dimension.

The process, however, was slow and gradual, and Dehon’s first missionary undertakings were rather improvised. After an unsuccessful attempt to take part in the evangelization of New Guinea, in 1888 an Ecuadorian priest, Julio Matovel, who had also founded a congregation devoted to the Sacred Heart, proposed to Dehon merging their institutes and sending French missionaries to Ecuador, a young republic consecrated to the Sacred Heart in 1874 by its conservative president, Gabriel García Moreno.¹⁹ The plan included building a basilica dedicated to the Sacred Heart in Quito, modeled on one at Montmartre in Paris, which was to be overseen by the new congregation. Dehon agreed, and in November 1888 the first two Dehonians departed for South America, where they assisted the local clergy in pastoral ministry for several years. The mission was short-lived, however, as in 1896 the missionaries were expelled from Ecuador following a revolution that brought liberal and anticlerical forces to power.²⁰ Meanwhile, in 1893, the Dehonians were invited by a Brazilian Catholic entrepreneur, Carlos Alberto de Menezes, to settle at his textile factory in Camaragibe (Pernambuco), and to provide spiritual assistance to his workers. Once again, the initiative was not launched by Dehon; yet on this occasion the new foundation proved lasting, and the congregation has maintained a continuous presence in northern Brazil ever since.²¹

The turning point came in 1897, when Dehon received permission from Rome to establish a mission in the Stanley Falls district, in the northern Congo Free State (renamed the Belgian Congo in 1908 and now the Democratic Republic of the Congo). It was a fully organized mission, negotiated with the political authorities in Brussels and, above all, established under the auspices of the Roman Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith.²² For the first time, the Dehonians were not operating in already Christianized contexts, as in Ecuador and Brazil, but among populations still to be converted, thereby

18 Ledure, *Le père Léon Dehon*, 167-77.

19 Menozzi, *Sacro Cuore*, 147-9; Henderson, *Gabriel García Moreno*, 145-76.

20 On this short mission, see Grison, *Souvenirs de l’Équateur*; Driedonkx, *Ecuador*.

21 A brief overview in Driedonkx, Da Costa Silva, “Our Mission in North Brazil”.

22 Pizzorusso, *Propaganda Fide*.

facing the challenges and difficulties of a genuine *missio ad gentes*. Rome expressed satisfaction with the congregation’s missionary work in Congo and elevated the Stanley Falls mission first to an apostolic prefecture (1904) and then to an apostolic vicariate (1908), definitively consecrating Dehon’s missionary aspirations.²³ As a reward and the culmination of his efforts, in 1906 the institute received the long-awaited approval from Rome.

The Dehonians’ strong involvement in missionary work was not without consequences and generated deep tensions within the congregation. In July 1897, just as the first missionaries were departing for Congo, some members sharply criticized Dehon’s social and missionary activism, arguing that it distorted the original nature and aims of the institute, and they faulted him for directing the charity of its members toward “les pays lointains” rather than toward “les misères morales qui pullulent autour de nous”.²⁴ For a moment, a fracture seemed inevitable, but the crisis was ultimately contained and the institute remained intact. Nevertheless, this underlying tension between spiritual vocation and pastoral engagement would long trouble the Dehonian identity and affect Dehon’s own legacy.²⁵

The congregation’s structures, however, were not fully adapted to the new demands generated by its growing missionary commitment. Over the years, Dehonian provinces established offices (the *procure*) to handle the financial and administrative management of their missions, but no specific schools or training programs were created to prepare future missionaries.²⁶ Vocational discernment for selecting candidates was likewise often cursory, especially in the early years, and the selection of missionaries, given the ever-pressing need to recruit new personnel, relied frequently on volunteering rather than on a careful assessment of their abilities and aptitudes, a practice that often affected the quality and effectiveness of their ministry, as we will see in the case of the Alberta mission.

23 On the Congo mission, see Jeanroy, *Vingt-cinq ans de mission*.

24 *Mémoire de la maison du Sacré-Cœur au R.P. Dehon*, 6 July 1897, in AD, B. 48/4A, Inv. 787. On this *mémoire*, see Neuhold, *Mission and Church*, 113-18.

25 On this issue, see Ledure, “Pensée sociale et projet fondateur”, 332-40; Neuhold, *Mission and Church*, 13-41.

26 The Studentato delle missioni, founded in Bologna in 1912, was a partial exception, though for many years it effectively served only to train the priests of the Italian province; Vassena, “Short History”, 12-15.

2 At the Origins of the Mission: Dehon and the French Canada

Dehon’s interest in Canada dated back at least to his years of priestly formation. While studying at the French Seminary in Rome, he was joined by several young Canadians, who first introduced him to the country’s affairs and customs. He formed a particularly close bond with Louis-Nazaire Bégin, later archbishop of Quebec and cardinal,²⁷ with whom he maintained an ongoing correspondence even after Bégin returned to Canada. In his letters, Bégin praised the Canadians’ deep and sincere Catholic faith, contrasting it with the anticlericalism and irreligiosity that had spread in France, the old motherland, after the Revolution and under the republican governments. For instance, in March 1889 he noted to Dehon:

Dans notre heureuse contrée, providentiellement soustraite aux influences néfastes de la grande Révolution française, la foi est encore très vive; [...] le sentiment religieux n’y est pas à l’état latent, mais il se manifeste au grand jour.²⁸

The country Bégin referred to, however, was not the Canadian Confederation as a whole, but French Canada, that is, the province of Quebec, founded by French colonists in the early seventeenth century and brought under British rule in 1763, while remaining steadfastly attached to the language, culture, and Catholic faith of its founders.

Dehon embraced Bégin’s extremely positive – if also idealized – image of a sincerely Catholic and French Canada, and helped disseminate it through his journalistic writings. Between 1889 and 1903, he wrote a monthly column, “Chroniques du Règne”, in the congregation’s journal, *Le Règne du Cœur de Jésus dans les âmes et dans les sociétés*, where he commented on major social and religious issues.²⁹ These chronicles contain numerous enthusiastic references to Canada/Quebec, portrayed as a model country where tradition and modernity could be reconciled: French-Canadians, the worthy descendants of the “race française”, were presented as pioneers in political liberties and social progress, yet also as sincere and steadfast Catholics.³⁰ However, the picture was not without its shadows: according to Dehon, Anglo-Saxon Protestantism threatened French Canadians’ cultural and religious identity, and tensions

27 Perin, s.v. “Bégin, Louis-Nazaire”; LeBlanc, *Dictionnaire biographique*, 238-42.

28 *Letter from Bégin to Dehon*, 9 March 1889, in AD, B. 107/3, Inv. 1163.60.

29 Ledure, *Le père Léon Dehon*, 139-40.

30 Dehon, “Chroniques du Règne”, January 1889, 12; August 1889, 123-9; August 1890, 124; July 1894, 135; March 1898, 49; April 1901, 65-9.

between linguistic groups were intensifying.³¹ He nevertheless trusted that the strength and vitality of Quebec’s citizens, together with their faith, would preserve their integrity.³²

In light of this highly flattering image of Canadian Christendom, Dehon soon began to envisage the possibility of establishing his congregation there. As noted above, he could rely on several personal connections within the Canadian episcopate, and in December 1891 Bégin – then about to be appointed coadjutor bishop of Quebec – offered to assist him with the recruitment of his fathers or in any other matter within his future diocese.³³ The following year, a small group of seminarians from the United States was admitted to the Dehonian scholasticate in Lille. Dehon hoped to develop it into a “séminaire d’américains”,³⁴ thereby attracting vocations from beyond Europe, but the initiative proved short-lived. In 1894, he had to decline the offer of a large property in Canada, as the congregation lacked sufficient personnel to undertake such a venture.³⁵ He did not, however, abandon his plans, and two years later he informed Gabriel Grison – his principal collaborator in missionary affairs – of his intention to open a “maison de formation” in America, regarding the United States or Canada as the most suitable locations.³⁶ Dehon was convinced that his congregation could draw new resources and vocations from a country as deeply religious as Quebec, a conviction that was further reinforced in the autumn of 1901, when he delivered a series of sermons at the Canadian Pontifical College in Rome, remaining deeply edified by the piety of both students and professors.³⁷

The need to establish a presence in Canada became particularly pressing for Dehon because of the French government’s increasingly anti-clerical policies.³⁸ In the spring of 1903, the Dehonians were expelled from France, like many other religious orders, their properties were confiscated, and they were forced to seek refuge

31 Dehon, “Chroniques du Règne”, February 1890, 31; Juin-July 1890, 90.

32 For a more objective historical analysis, see Murphy, Perin, *A Concise History*, 190-260. The Canadian Catholic Church, in Quebec and elsewhere, was far less unanimous than Dehon believed; on these difficulties and the resulting expansion of the Holy See’s intervention in Canadian ecclesiastical affairs, see Perin, *Rome in Canada*.

33 *Letter from Bégin to Dehon*, 14 December 1891, in AD, B. 21/3C, Inv. 360.05.

34 Dehon, *Notes quotidiennes*, vol. 6 (1892-94), 33, in AD, B. 28/6, Inv. 528.06; *Letter from Dehon to Gabriel Grison*, 19 November 1892, in AD, B. 24/8, Inv. 500.10.

35 *Letter from Dehon to Grison*, 19 November 1894, in AD, B. 24/8, Inv. 500.15.

36 *Letter from Dehon to Grison*, 4 February 1896, in AD, B. 24/8, Inv. 500.24.

37 Dehon, *Notes quotidiennes*, vol. 17 (1901-02), 32, in AD, B. 29/17, Inv. 529.05. On the Canadian College, see Racine St-Jacques, “*Mens sana*”.

38 Sorrel, *La République contre les congrégations*, 94-119.

in Belgium.³⁹ In this context, Canada could naturally offer a second homeland and a new beginning for the French members of the congregation. Dehon therefore renewed contact with Bégin, who had in the meantime become archbishop of Quebec, but his diocese, already hosting around seventy congregations, did not require additional personnel, and no agreement could be reached.⁴⁰ Dehon then turned his attention to northwestern Canada, where hundreds of thousands of immigrants, mostly from Central and Eastern Europe, were settling in those years. In the autumn of 1909, through Bégin's vicar general, Cyrille-Alfred Marois, Dehon contacted Adéland Langevin, archbishop of St. Boniface (Manitoba), and offered to begin a mission in his diocese,⁴¹ but this attempt also failed.⁴² Dehon's efforts to secure a Canadian mission thus once again appeared destined to come to nothing. Marois, however, did not give up: he forwarded Dehon's letter farther west to Émile Legal, bishop of St. Albert (Alberta),⁴³ who accepted the proposal enthusiastically.⁴⁴

Dehon immediately set about organizing the mission, but faced several difficulties. He first had to convince the superior and councilors of the Franco-Belgian province of the congregation, who were reluctant to support the initiative.⁴⁵ He then struggled to find “hommes de bonne volonté”⁴⁶ to be sent to Alberta. At least three missionaries were required to launch the initiative, but the first candidates Dehon approached declined. Eventually, he succeeded in persuading Eutrope Gaborit (1873-1940), David Steinmetz (1875-1940), and Irénée Carpentier (1883-1953). They set sail from Le Havre for Canada in early July 1910, accompanied by Jules-Albert Soyer, a priest who did not belong to the congregation. Steinmetz had spent several years in Congo, but his companions had no prior missionary experience, and only Gaborit had some knowledge of English, which he had studied for a few months in London.

Financing the mission also proved problematic. Legal made it clear that he could not cover travel expenses or provide the missionaries with local financial support, since in Alberta the general rule was that “les populations soutiennent leurs prêtres et leur fournissent

39 Ledure, *Le père Léon Dehon*, 187-93.

40 Ducamp, *Le père Dehon*, 455; “English-Speaking Canada”, 2.

41 *Letter from Marois to Dehon*, 20 November 1909, in AD, B. 102/4, Inv. 1149.00.

42 *Letter from Langevin to Marois*, 27 November 1909, in AD, B. 102/4, Inv. 1149.01.

43 Huel, s.v. “Legal, Émile-Joseph”; LeBlanc, *Dictionnaire biographique*, 718-20.

44 *Letter from Legal to Dehon*, 10 December 1909, in AD, B. 102/4, Inv. 1149.03.

45 *Letter from Dehon to Gerlach Kusters*, April 1910, in AD, B. 74/3, Inv. 971.26.

46 *Letter from Dehon to Falleur*, 19 April 1910, in AD, B. 16/6bis, Inv. 122.08.

ce qu'il faut pour vivre".⁴⁷ Dehon sought to obtain funding from two prominent French organizations that supported Catholic missions, the *Œuvre de la propagation de la foi* and the *Œuvre apostolique*, but both replied that they were unable to contribute.⁴⁸ It was therefore inevitable that the congregation itself should bear the full cost of establishing the mission.

3 An Anti-Protestant Mission?

The Canadian mission eventually launched by Dehon proved quite different from the one he had long imagined. His missionaries were not sent to Quebec - that French and Catholic Canada he had so strongly idealized - but to Alberta, a province which had entered the Canadian Confederation only five years earlier (1905) and was still sparsely populated and undergoing settlement. The two areas were separated not only by thousands of kilometers, but also by significant social, linguistic, and cultural differences.⁴⁹ Catholicism and the French language did not enjoy there the same predominance as in old New France: according to contemporary statistics collected by Dehon, the diocese of St. Albert counted just under 34,000 Catholics at the time, of whom only about 18,000 were French-speaking.⁵⁰ In northwestern Canada, Catholics were in fact mostly immigrants from Germany, Poland and Ukraine,⁵¹ who did not speak French and mainly adopted English as their second language.⁵² The Catholic clergy, by contrast, was predominantly French-speaking,⁵³ so that proficiency in several languages was indispensable for the exercise

47 *Letter from Legal to Dehon*, 24 May 1910, in AD, B. 21/9B, Inv. 472.12.

48 *Letter from Olivier de Durfort to Dehon*, May-June 1910, in AD, B. 21/6.2, Inv. 424.14; *Letter from Alexandre Guasco to Dehon*, 16 August 1910, in AD, B. 21/9C, Inv. 473.13.

49 In reply to Dehon, who had asked him to offer advice to his missionaries, a priest from Montreal frankly admitted: "Il me sera difficile de donner des renseignements sur l'Alberta. C'est trop loin de Montréal, environ la distance de Brest à Moscou"; *Letter from Adolphe Volbart to Dehon*, 1 June 1910, in AD, B. 21/6.2, Inv. 424.03.

50 These data are drawn from Dehon, *Notes quotidiennes*, vol. 26 (1910), 38, in AD, B. 30/26, Inv. 530.01. On the history of Catholicism in Alberta, closely linked to the missionary activities of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, see Choquette, *The Oblate Assault*, 86-93 and *passim*; Levasseur, *Les oblats de Marie Immaculée*, 211-28.

51 Perin, *L'Église des immigrants*.

52 Murphy, Stortz, *Creed and Culture*, xx-xxi.

53 Noll, *A History of Christianity*, 256, notes that, "at the beginning of World War I, all of the Catholic bishops in western Canada were French-speaking".

of pastoral ministry in those territories.⁵⁴ The presence and activism of Protestant denominations were also significantly greater.⁵⁵

In Alberta, the Dehonians were therefore tasked with a ministry fundamentally different from what they would have undertaken in Quebec, where Catholic institutions already structured much of social life. Instead of focusing on prayer, education, and the recruitment of new vocations for the congregation, they were required to provide spiritual and pastoral care to large numbers of Catholic immigrants from various parts of Europe, while seeking to preserve their faith against religious indifference and Protestant proselytism. From his very first letter to Dehon, Legal had explicitly defined this objective, asking the Dehonian missionaries to cooperate in what he described as “l’œuvre de la préservation de ces peuples, que la propagande protestante s’efforce de nous ravir, en les arrachant à l’unité catholique”.⁵⁶

The defensive and anti-Protestant character of the mission in Alberta⁵⁷ was further articulated by Dehon himself in the instructions he prepared for the missionaries, probably in early summer 1910.⁵⁸ After evoking the glorious history of French Canada – that “belle nation catholique” which had been able to defend its faith and culture even under British rule –, he explained that the congregation had been called to Alberta “pour contribuer à l’organisation paroissiale des colons qui arrivent en masse et parmi lesquels les catholiques sont trop mêlés aux protestants”. In carrying out their pastoral task, the Dehonian missionaries, he argued, would have to confront three major obstacles: “les sociétés secrètes, le protestantisme et le matérialisme”.

The true enemy, however, was Protestantism, of which secret societies – especially Freemasonry – and materialism were merely epiphenomena. “Le protestantisme, voilà l’ennemi!”, Dehon wrote emphatically, overturning Léon Gambetta’s famous maxim. Indeed,

54 Painchaud, “Les exigences linguistiques”, especially 54-64.

55 On Catholic-Protestant relations, and tensions, in Canada, see Noll, *A History of Christianity*, 256-84.

56 *Letter from Legal to Dehon*, 24 May 1910, in AD, B. 21/9C, Inv. 472.12. From the beginning, the Dehonian missionaries were assigned solely to parish ministry, while the apostolate among Indigenous peoples in northwestern Canada remained under the exclusive jurisdiction of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate; see Huel, *Proclaiming the Gospel*.

57 For a historiographical overview of Catholic anti-Protestantism in the missionary context, see Berrettini et al., *L’antiprotestantesimo cattolico*, 5-20. In the British Empire, and therefore in Canada, this polemical attitude also emerged as reaction to widespread anti-Catholicism, on which see Miller, “Anti-Catholicism in Canada”; Vaughan, *Anti-Catholicism and British Identities*.

58 Dehon, *À mes missionnaires. Pour le Canada* (circa June-July 1910), in AD, B. 38/6, Inv. 668.02, from which the quotations that follow are taken.

he devoted the second part of his instructions to demonstrating that Protestantism, especially Anglicanism, had an “origine honteuse”, that its principle was “ruineux”, and that, for this very reason, it was already “en pleine dissolution”. These arguments were characteristic of Catholic anti-Protestant discourse and were drawn in large part from Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet’s works,⁵⁹ explicitly cited in the instructions. Like Bossuet, moreover, Dehon urged his missionaries to distinguish between the “secte” and the faithful: they were to combat Protestantism relentlessly, as an “affreuse maladie morale, qui ronge certaines nations et les conduit peu à peu au matérialisme et à l’athéisme”, while at the same time showing compassion toward Protestants, who were to be treated with kindness and referred to from the pulpit as “nos frères séparés”.

Despite the strongly polemical tone of Dehon’s instructions, the everyday practice of the Dehonian missionaries in Alberta proved to be considerably more pragmatic and less confrontational and, in concrete terms, anti-Protestantism played only a marginal role in their daily activities. Faced with the immense logistical and material challenges of ministering to small and dispersed Catholic populations across a vast territory almost entirely lacking ecclesiastical infrastructure, the missionaries’ priorities were shaped less by confessional antagonism than by the pressing need to provide basic pastoral care and to ensure the survival of fragile communities. Protestant neighbors were not so much an abstract adversary as an inescapable social reality, and forms of practical coexistence and even mutual solidarity prevailed over systematic polemics.

So, for example, when Dehon visited his missionaries in Alberta in September 1910, during a journey to North America that turned into a veritable round-the-world tour, he noted with some surprise that Protestants of Wainwright contributed financially to the construction of the Catholic chapel, “pour l’accroissement du pays” – and that Catholics did the same for Protestant initiatives. He was similarly struck when a Protestant neighbor, aware that the Catholic missionaries were hosting guests, sent them a chicken and some cake; and he remarked: “Cela porte bonheur d’aider les missionnaires”.⁶⁰ A more substantial form of collaboration soon developed in Heath, where Catholics and Protestants shared the same building for their respective religious services, and in the early weeks at Elm Park, local Protestants offered Gaborit the use of their chapel for the celebration of Mass.⁶¹

59 For the intellectual background informing Dehon’s anti-Protestant discourse, see Sacquin, *Entre Bossuet et Maurras*.

60 Dehon, *Notes quotidiennes*, vol. 27 (1910), 19-20, in AD, B. 30/27, Inv. 530.02.

61 “English-Speaking Canada”, 10, 13.

To be sure, anti-Protestant prejudice remained deeply rooted among the Dehonian missionaries, and the goal of preserving Catholic faithful from conversion to Protestantism continued to be central.⁶² Yet missionary practice was far removed from the harsh rhetoric of Dehon’s instructions, just as confessional boundaries proved to be more permeable in practice than they appeared on paper.

4 The Establishment of the Mission

The mission’s first months were harsh.⁶³ Legal had not hidden from Dehon the precariousness of the situation in Alberta and outlined, from the outset, the difficulties the new foundation would face:

Le champ que je vous destine sera étendu. Votre principale maison sera une grande ligne de chemin de fer. La ligne du Grand Tronc Pacific. Je ne sais encore au juste quelle serait la meilleure place, Wainwright ou Toefield. Wainwright est appelé à devenir plus important. C’est un point divisional de la ligne. Il n’y a rien de construit encore, tout est à organiser: ni maison, ni chapelle.⁶⁴

Shortly after their arrival in St. Albert, around 22 July 1910, the Dehonian missionaries learned that they had been assigned to Wainwright, about 220 km to the southeast. The town had been founded only two years earlier but, thanks to the presence of the railway, already had a population of some 1,200 inhabitants. There were no churches and no presbyteries: the fathers rented a small house and, during the first months, celebrated Sunday Mass in a grocery store.⁶⁵ Gaborit, whom Dehon had chosen as superior of the mission, promptly took steps to address this situation: he established a committee among local Catholics, organized a fundraising collection, and began construction of a two-story building that would serve both as residence and chapel.

As Legal had foreseen, the financial support of the mission depended largely on the offerings and contributions of the faithful; however, in Wainwright there were barely some fifty Catholics, and four priests were clearly too many for their spiritual needs.

62 For instance, *Letter from Jean-Baptiste Vianney Cochet to Dehon*, 26 July 1918, in AD, B. 102/4, Inv. 1149.26: “Le bien se fait quand même, on empêche bien des gens de se revirer protestants ou de tomber dans l’indifférence”.

63 For general accounts of the history of the mission, see Caron, *Petite histoire*, 5-52; “English-Speaking Canada”, 1-25.

64 *Letter from Legal to Dehon*, 24 May 1910, in AD, B. 21/9B, Inv. 472.12.

65 Dehon, *Notes quotidiennes*, vol. 27 (1910), 18, in AD, B. 30/27, Inv. 530.02.

Within a few months it thus became evident that the missionaries would have to separate in order to cover a wider territory. When Dehon reached them in September 1910, he found only Gaborit and Carpentier in Wainwright, since Steinmetz and Soyer had already moved to Edmonton, the capital of Alberta, to replace a parish priest there. For his part, Gaborit traveled through the surrounding areas of Wainwright, seeking out new faithful and preparing the establishment of committees, churches, and parishes.

Taking advantage of the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway, on which they were allowed to travel free of charge, the missionaries began serving around ten communities, mainly located along the line, with some as far as 170 km from Wainwright.⁶⁶ To move more easily to places where the train did not reach, they also acquired a horse-drawn carriage. From the autumn of 1910, the mission became itinerant: although their main residence remained in Wainwright, the Dehonians regularly traveled from one location to another to celebrate Mass and administer the sacraments. This work was demanding and dispersive, as the faithful were scattered across a vast territory, making it difficult to maintain regular contact with all of them. In a letter to Dehon dated February 1911, Gaborit described the challenges of these journeys in vivid terms:

L'autre jour j'ai visité des catholiques au nord de Wainwright à, à peu près, 25 milles. Ce fut un voyage très difficile, pas de route, rien que de la neige. Il m'a fallu me guider avec la lune et les étoiles pendant la nuit et le jour avec le soleil. C'est un voyage dangereux, dit-on, mais intéressant.⁶⁷

Despite these difficulties, the mission grew rapidly. In December 1910, Legal proposed that the Dehonians take charge of a new parish in Elm Park, a district of Edmonton inhabited by hundreds of workers employed in railway construction. Gaborit accepted it enthusiastically, considering the parish highly promising,⁶⁸ and by the following February a provisional wooden chapel had already been erected. To cover the territory more effectively, in the spring of 1911 the four missionaries decided to split up, each establishing in a different center: Soyer went to Chauvin, populated almost entirely by French-Canadians; Carpentier remained in Wainwright; Steinmetz settled in Viking, where a community of Irish, German, and Polish

66 *Letter from Gaborit to Falleur*, 12 October 1910, in AD, B. 68/2, Inv. 904.23: “Nous avons 7 postes à visiter: Chauvin, Edgerton, Wainwright, Viking, Holden, Ryley, Tofield. Le mois prochain, nous allons créer 2 autres stations, Cooking [Lake] et Oxville”.

67 *Letter from Gaborit to Dehon*, 9 February 1911, in AD, B. 21/6.1, Inv. 423.26.

68 *Letter from Gaborit to Dehon*, 1 December 1910, in AD, B. 68/2, Inv. 904.03.

Catholics lived; and Gaborit took up permanent residence in Edmonton as parish priest. Each missionary would thus be responsible, both spiritually and materially, for a specific area of the mission, and would report to the local superior each month.⁶⁹

Despite this reorganization, four missionaries were still too few for such a vast territory, and reinforcements were therefore needed. With a touch of bravado, Gaborit wrote to Dehon in early 1911: “Si vous aviez 10 prêtres de plus à nous envoyer, nous prendrions possession de la moitié de l’Ouest canadien”.⁷⁰ The remark was bold, but the need for additional personnel was real; consequently, a new group of Dehonians was dispatched to Alberta in May 1911. Given the many material demands of missionary life, this group comprised only one priest, Aubin-Marie Huet (1873-1934) – in fact still a deacon, who was ordained at St. Albert in November 1911 – and three religious brothers: Gabriel-Marie Lérigny (1893-1943), Georges Brégand, and Lazare Pierson. They were to manage all practical matters (such as cooking and other domestic tasks), thereby freeing the missionaries to devote themselves to pastoral ministry.

Arriving in Alberta in late June, the new missionaries were assigned to the existing missions: Huet and Brégand remained at Elm Park with Gaborit, Pierson was sent to Viking with Steinmetz, while Lérigny joined Carpentier in Wainwright. The new contingent was thus employed to consolidate the mission rather than to extend it further, since both Dehon and Gaborit wished to ensure the presence of at least two men in each location, so as to re-establish some form of community life. Moreover, once the initial momentum had passed, the situation of the mission stabilized and prospects for rapid growth appeared to have diminished. In a letter dated 12 March 1912 and written from Wainwright, Carpentier provided Dehon with a far from idyllic picture of the mission. He argued that the number of faithful was not increasing because the population was “instable”, that economic circumstances remained precarious, and that Legal – despite his goodwill – was unable to assign new posts in areas where the local population could support a priest and build a church. Carpentier’s letter also conveyed a degree of personal disappointment: life in northwestern Canada had proved harsher than expected, leading him to conclude that “bien peu de pères et de frères viendraient, s’ils connaissaient tout cela”.⁷¹

Perhaps for this reason as well, Dehon decided not to send additional missionaries to Alberta either in 1912 or in 1913. He explained to Legal that the congregation was struggling to recruit

69 *Letter from Gaborit to Dehon*, 3 April 1911, in AD, B. 68/2, Inv. 904.04.

70 *Letter from Gaborit to Dehon*, 9 February 1911, in AD, B. 21/6.1, Inv. 423.26.

71 *Letter from Carpentier to Dehon*, 12 March 1912, in AD, B. 102/4, Inv. 1149.22.

new members in France and that its African missions were absorbing all available resources, while also suggesting that no requests for further missionaries had come from Canada.⁷² Nevertheless, a third group of missionaries was dispatched in May 1914. It comprised three priests – Honoré Lemaire (1880-1954), Jean-Baptiste Vianney Cochet (1883-1949), and Augustinus Koolen (1881-1956) – and one religious brother, François de Sales Berger (1882-1930), who had already gained some experience in Congo. Gaborit took advantage of their arrival to give renewed impetus to the mission. He established a new base at Tawatinaw, some 90 km north of Edmonton, to which Huet was assigned, and seriously considered a proposal from the apostolic vicar of Athabasca-Mackenzie to send missionaries to Peace River, in the far west of Alberta. He even envisaged the creation of a province of the congregation in Alberta within five years.⁷³

5 Difficulties and Crisis of the Mission

These plans were disrupted only a few months later by the outbreak of the First World War. The younger French missionaries were called up for military service, and Pierson, who had not yet taken vows, left in August to return to France.⁷⁴ The others were initially uncertain how to proceed, but ultimately decided to remain in Canada, partly in obedience to Legal’s explicit instruction, thereby rendering themselves liable to prosecution for draft evasion. At the end of August 1914, Saint-Quentin – where Dehon and the congregation’s general council were based – was taken by the German army and remained under military occupation until October 1918.⁷⁵ Relations between Canada and France were completely severed, and for more than three years Dehon received no news from his missionaries in Alberta.⁷⁶

Contacts were resumed only in January 1918, when Gaborit managed to send Dehon a long letter updating him on the situation.

72 *Letter from Dehon to Legal*, 12 December 1912, in AD, B. 110/3, Inv. 1170.92.

73 *Letter from Gaborit to Dehon*, 24 March 1914, in AD, B. 21/6.1, Inv. 423.25. An account of the Dehonian presence in Alberta in the summer of 1914 is provided by Legal, *Short Sketches*, 40-1, 109-10, 112-13: at that time, the missionaries were based at Elm Park (Gaborit, Cochet, Pierson), Viking (Steinmetz, Koolen), Wainwright (Carpentier, Lemaire, Lérigny), Chauvin (Soyer) and Tawatinaw (Huet, Berger).

74 *Letter from Gaborit to Dehon*, 15 August 1914, in AD, B. 102/4, Inv. 1149.06.

75 For the impact of the war on Dehon’s life and his congregation, see Arnaiz Ecker, *Dehon e i dehoniani*, especially 21-41.

76 In August 1917, for example, Dehon still did not know whether his missionaries had remained in Canada or returned to Europe; *Letter from Dehon to Bonifacius van Hommerich*, 21 August 1917, in AD, B. 19/7A.2, Inv. 266.13.

During the preceding years, the work in Alberta had developed only modestly, “en partie à cause de la guerre qui a paralysé les affaires au Canada comme ailleurs”,⁷⁷ and the financial situation remained precarious. Gaborit explained that he had tried to move personnel as little as possible, to avoid tensions, but he did not conceal that disagreements had emerged with some of the confreres under his supervision. Between the lines, it was clear that things were far from ideal, and Dehon received confirmation of this impression in Gaborit’s subsequent letter, which opened with a blunt assessment: “Notre mission au Canada n’a point beaucoup d’avenir, c’est certain”.

The difficulties were manifold, ranging from the economic crisis brought about by the war, which had erased the community’s modest investments in real estate, to the failure to recruit new vocations among the local population. The principal problem, however, lay in the inadequacy of the missionaries themselves. On this point Gaborit was particularly severe:

Ce qui fait le plus défaut, c’est des sujets dévoués qui voudraient faire quelques sacrifices pour l’œuvre. Or, je vous assure qu’ils sont rares parmi nous. Tous ceux qui sont venus au Canada manquent de cet esprit de corps et même je dirais qu’ils cherchent plutôt leur indépendance, au point de vue religieux.⁷⁸

Concrete examples were not lacking. Soyer had been driven out by his parishioners in Chauvin, exasperated by his “maladresses”; Steinmetz was unable to keep his accounts in order, prompting complaints from the people of Viking; Koolen demanded “l’indépendance absolue” in Clyde and seemed governed by the most material impulses (“Il n’y a que la nature qui parle en lui et de la manière la plus brutale”, as Gaborit put it).⁷⁹ Carpentier lived “d’une manière très relâchée”, used the funds of the parish of Wainwright for personal needs, and was on the verge of leaving the congregation to join the secular clergy.⁸⁰ Notably, all of these were priests. Matters were no better among the brothers: Brégand had long since left; Pierson had returned to France – as we have seen; Lérigny was increasingly dissatisfied and left the congregation in July 1919, later marrying.

More generally, the mission offered little prospect of long-term consolidation. The missionaries’ deployment across the territory

77 *Letter from Gaborit to Dehon*, 28 January 1918, in AD, B. 102/4, Inv. 1149.07.

78 *Letter from Gaborit to Dehon*, 4 March 1918, in AD, B. 102/4, Inv. 1149.08.

79 *Letter from Gaborit to Dehon*, 28 January 1918, in AD, B. 102/4, Inv. 1149.07.

80 *Letter from Gaborit to Dehon*, 4 March 1918, in AD, B. 102/4, Inv. 1149.08. Carpentier definitively left the congregation in 1919 and entered the clergy of the diocese of Prince Albert, in Saskatchewan.

depended entirely on the needs and decisions of the local bishop, who employed them to fill gaps in a diocesan clergy too small to meet all pastoral requirements. But once that need was satisfied, what would become of the Dehonians? They would be gradually replaced by secular priests, all the more since the churches and presbyteries they had built over the years belonged not to the congregation, but to the parishes (and thus to the diocese). This arrangement also left the missionaries largely dependent on episcopal discretion: Legal, who had called them to Alberta, had always been generous, but would his successors be equally so? This was the “péril canadien” – as Cochet labelled it in August 1914⁸¹ – and it loomed threateningly over the mission. The only conceivable remedy lay in freeing the Dehonian activities in Alberta from exclusive reliance on diocesan decisions, for example by establishing a house or college of their own. Yet such a project required personnel and resources, and both were lacking after the First World War.

To revitalize the mission, Dehon considered broadening it. Up to that point, indeed, it had been an “œuvre française”,⁸² hierarchically and financially dependent on the Franco-Belgian province of the congregation. After the war, however, that province was exhausted and Dehon turned to the better-resourced Dutch fathers in the hope of securing support for the Canadian enterprise. Such involvement would inevitably have altered the project’s original framework: it would no longer have been a Franco-Canadian mission, but an ‘American’ one, potentially extending across North America and, above all, English-speaking. A few tentative signs of encouragement from Alberta seemed to make such a shift desirable. For the first time in nearly ten years, a young Canadian, Joseph-Arthur Saint-Pierre, asked to join the congregation, and in March 1919 a provisional novitiate was opened for him at Elm Park.⁸³

This hope, however, proved illusory. The collaboration with the Dutch province never materialized, while the arrival of the first novice, who took his vows in the spring of 1920, was largely offset by the loss of two other missionaries: Koolen decided to leave the congregation in 1921,⁸⁴ and Steinmetz abruptly returned to Europe in 1922 after taking all the funds from his post.⁸⁵ Dehon, who at the beginning of 1920 had contemplated sending reinforcements to

81 *Letter from Cochet to Dehon*, 16 August 1914, in AD, B. 102/4, Inv. 1149. 23.

82 *Letter from Dehon to Lambertus van Halbeek*, 27 January 1919, in AD, B. 74/6, Inv. 974.19.

83 *Letter from Dehon to Gaborit*, 17 March 1919, in AD, B. 18/6.12, Inv. 214.18.

84 *Letter from Koolen to Dehon*, 19 July 1921, in AD, B. 98/1B, Inv. 1135.32. Koolen was officially secularized in April 1924.

85 *Letter from Gaborit to Dehon*, 22 March 1922, in AD, B. 102/4, Inv. 1149.16.

Alberta,⁸⁶ chose not to proceed with this plan and deferred any such decision. In October 1921 he even dispatched Cochet to the United States to raise funds for the Basilica of Christ the King (*Cristo Re*), then under construction in Rome,⁸⁷ thereby depriving Alberta of yet another priest.

Above all, the death of Legal in March 1920 extinguished any remaining hope of sustaining the mission. His successor, Henry Joseph O’Leary, of Irish origin, showed goodwill towards the Dehonians, but he did not conceal his intention to replace them with English-speaking diocesan clergy as soon as it became possible.⁸⁸ The mission was no longer viable – Dehon himself had to admit it in August 1921⁸⁹ – but it lingered on for another fifteen years, gradually dwindling. In 1924, O’Leary removed the Dehonians from the populous parish of Elm Park, founded by Gaborit in 1910, and transferred them to Beaumont, some 30 km south of Edmonton.⁹⁰ In 1926, Wainwright followed: the parish was taken from Lemaire, and entrusted to an Irish diocesan priest, while Chauvin remained under Dehonian administration until Huet’s death in 1934.

Gaborit nonetheless sought to hold on at Beaumont, where he relocated the novitiate and founded a small school. A few novices arrived in 1927,⁹¹ and between 1929 and 1931 two new priests came from France, Marcel Claude (1901-1957) and Paul Delplanque (1890-1949) – the first reinforcements in more than fifteen years. Relations with O’Leary, however, became increasingly strained, and in September 1931 the new superior general, Laurent Philippe, who had succeeded Dehon in 1926, travelled to Canada in person to clarify the situation. Within a few days he concluded that there was no longer room for the congregation in Alberta: the archbishop did not wish to have French missionaries in his diocese and demanded that the mission be placed under “des supérieurs américains”. Philippe

86 Letter from Dehon to Laurent Philippe, 10 March 1920, in AD, B. 22/12, Inv. 466.01.

87 Letter from Dehon to Henry Joseph O’Leary, 16 October 1921, in AD, B. 16/1, Inv. 114.08.

88 S.v. “O’Leary, Henry Joseph”; LeBlanc, *Dictionnaire biographique*, 395, 579, 677, 789, 887-9. On the struggle between French- and English-speaking clergy in northwestern Canada, see Huel, “The Irish French Conflict”. On ethnic and linguistic tensions within Canadian Catholicism, see Choquette, “English-French Relations”.

89 Letter from Dehon to Falleur, 24 August 1921, in AD, B. 19/9A.1, Inv. 278.45: “Pour le Canada, nous l’abandonnerons probablement, le nouvel évêque désire un clergé séculier”.

90 Caron, *Petite histoire*, 12-13.

91 Caron, *Petite histoire*, 21-5.

judged these conditions unacceptable,⁹² and it was therefore decided to relocate the last missionaries to Montreal, where a small house was purchased in 1936. Only Gaborit chose to remain in Beaumont, where he died in March 1940.⁹³ With him, the Dehonian presence in Alberta came definitively to an end.

6 Reasons for Failure: Religious Vocation and the Frontier Society

Despite its comparatively long duration (a full thirty years), the mission proved largely unsuccessful in institutional terms, since it failed to establish durable structures of formation, recruitment, and governance in Alberta. The congregation nevertheless remained present in Canada, notably in Montreal, and after the Second World War it managed to consolidate and expand this presence, largely through the efforts of Dutch fathers, ultimately creating two Canadian provinces in 1974, in Quebec and Ontario.⁹⁴ Alberta, however, saw no further Dehonian foundations, and the initiative begun in 1910 was not resumed. The reasons for this outcome were multiple.

Some of the mission's difficulties were inherent in how it was conceived and launched. The undertaking was organized hastily, without a clear objective or a sound understanding of the context in which the missionaries would operate. Dehon's desire to establish a foothold in Canada led him to seize the only concrete opportunity that materialized, even though the actual prospects for growth and consolidation in Alberta were uncertain from the outset. The anti-Protestant framework through which Dehon sought to justify the mission likewise proved, in practice, more rhetorical than operative. The personnel assigned to the mission were also unevenly prepared for this form of apostolate – linguistically as well as pastorally – and often proved ill-suited to the tasks they were assigned. Several missionaries, moreover, seemed to have crossed the Atlantic in pursuit of a second chance, or simply because few prospects remained open to them in Europe, rather than out of a sustained missionary vocation. Soyer, for example, sought to escape a situation of serious indebtedness; Carpentier had received an inadequate religious

⁹² *Letter from Louis Weiskopf to Ignace Devrainne*, 21 October 1931, in AD, B. 70/3, Inv. 927.70: “L’archevêque d’Edmonton serait content de nous avoir dans son diocèse, mais il ne veut pas de français, qu’il cherche à éloigner systématiquement. [...] Il voudrait avoir des supérieurs américains. Ces exigences paraissent inacceptables et l’on finira par quitter ce diocèse pour aller ailleurs”.

⁹³ For an account of the final phases of the mission, see “English-Speaking Canada”, 20-5.

⁹⁴ “English-Speaking Canada”, 26-48; “French-Canadian Province”, 1-10.

formation; Pierson had been unable to complete his novitiate in France; and Huet had to be ordained in Canada because he proved unable to master Latin. Even the superior general Philippe had to concede in 1931 that “ceux qu’on y avait envoyés [to Canada] étaient loin de répondre aux exigences du moment”.⁹⁵

As we have seen, contingent circumstances compounded these structural weaknesses. The outbreak of the First World War undermined the modest investments undertaken by Gaborit to place the mission on a more secure financial footing and, for several years, made it nearly impossible for the congregation to send new missionaries and resources to Alberta. Equally important, the mission’s limited institutional autonomy made its fate heavily dependent on the orientations – and at times even the personal sympathies – of local bishops, so that the arrival in Edmonton of a markedly Anglophile prelate such as O’Leary delivered the final blow to an already precarious situation.

At a deeper level, however, the failure of the mission also stemmed from the Dehonians’ difficulty in understanding and engaging productively with the values and ways of life that prevailed in Alberta. Although they came from societies that were already profoundly secularized, the European missionaries found themselves disoriented when confronted with the starkly utilitarian ethos of North American pioneer society, in which money, success, and material prosperity seemed to function as the primary markers of social conduct. Religion certainly retained a visible presence and a degree of social relevance within this fluid and egalitarian society; yet, in the eyes of the Dehonian missionaries, what was largely lacking was a strong sense of transcendence and interior spiritual commitment. Church affiliation and adherence to religious norms appeared to be motivated more often by social convenience or communal belonging than by a deeply internalized act of faith. Nearly two years after his arrival in Canada, Carpentier still struggled to come to terms with this situation and described it to Dehon in scandalized terms:

Les canadiens ont-ils vraiment de la religion? Je réponds négativement, sans crainte de me tromper. La religion est pour eux une chose de surface. Ils ne vivent pas d’une vie catholique. Ils aiment le culte extérieur, les cérémonies; ils ne comprennent pas que le culte intérieur est plus important. Ils comprennent que le prêtre est un personnage très digne de respect; leur confiance en lui et en ses prières vont parfois jusqu’à la superstition [...]. Ils ont beaucoup de foi extérieure; mais comme cette foi ne pénètre guère leur âme, leur cœur, leur vie, un rien suffit pour l’ébranler.

95 *Letter from Philippe to Devrainne*, 26 March 1931, in AD, B. 70/3, Inv. 927.51.

Leur religion est un véritable paradoxe, un perpétuel contre-sens.⁹⁶

Economic concerns and material success dominated everyday life. “Dans ce pays-ci c’est le dollar qui compte, le bon Dieu vient après, s’il peut”, Cochet observed in 1918, adding that conversations with the faithful revolved around “vache, cochon, poules, foin et blé, dollars en banque ou en espoir”, far more than around religious matters.⁹⁷ Being poor – or even merely appearing so – was regarded as “immoral”.⁹⁸ This pervasive preoccupation with business also contributed to keeping younger generations at a distance from religious vocations. At the same time, frontier society – deeply attached to individual freedom and egalitarianism – proved resistant to behavioral norms and ecclesiastical prescriptions perceived as impractical or arbitrary. Diocesan regulations prohibiting dancing at parish gatherings or banning membership in Freemasonry and secret societies thus remained largely unenforceable.

If the missionaries felt that they were building on sand, exposure to the frontier society also shaped their own conduct and tested their religious vocation. Despite their vow of poverty, Dehonians became soon involved in investments and real-estate ventures, and several – under the influence of what Gaborit termed as “l’instinct de propriété”⁹⁹ – managed entrusted funds with increasing latitude, at times even for personal purpose, depositing them in their own names rather than that of the congregation. Moreover, the necessity of living in isolation, often separated by great distances, made it impossible to observe the community life prescribed by the Constitutions and significantly weakened bonds of hierarchical obedience. Gaborit repeatedly lamented in his letters the excessive independence of the missionaries, a tendency he proved unable to correct. Not everyone viewed these developments negatively. Cochet, for example, welcomed the fact that Dehonians in Canada did not spend “leur temps à critiquer les supérieurs de la Congrégation comme dans telle ou telle maison d’Europe”, and that conflicts did not generate “des rancunes qui durent toute la vie”.¹⁰⁰

Engagement with the frontier society deeply reshaped the missionaries’ lives and attitudes, and the resulting transformation often proved difficult to reverse. In 1922, Gaborit informed Dehon

96 *Letter from Carpentier to Dehon*, 12 March 1912, in AD, B. 102/4, Inv. 1149.22.

97 *Letter from Cochet to Dehon*, 26 July 1918, in AD, B. 102/4, Inv. 1149.26.

98 *Letter from Cochet to Dehon*, 17 June 1919, in AD, B. 102/4, Inv. 1149.28: “Apparaître comme miséreux ici est considéré comme immoral”.

99 *Letter from Gaborit to Dehon*, 25 March 1914, in AD, B. 21/6.1, Inv. 423.25.

100 *Letter from Cochet to Dehon*, 16 August 1914, in AD, B. 102/4, Inv. 1149.23; 26 July 1918, in AD, B. 102/4, Inv. 1149.26.

that none of his missionaries intended to return to Europe, regardless of the mission's future: “Leur mentalité est américaine - he explained - ce qui est bien différent de l'esprit d'Europe. Ils prévoient qu'ils ne pourraient plus se plier, non pas à la règle, mais aux manières et vues des maisons d'Europe”.¹⁰¹

Their religious vocation, too, did not emerge unscathed from this experience. Isolation, the near absence of community life and fraternal support, and daily immersion in a pragmatic and utilitarian social environment progressively eroded their sense of belonging to the congregation and their attachment to its original charism - namely, the consecration as victims to the Sacred Heart. Many missionaries increasingly regarded themselves as effectively autonomous, and leaving the order to join the diocesan clergy came to appear a natural option: six out of ten Dehonian priests were secularized, while four out of five brothers returned to the lay state. These high rates of departure among those serving in Alberta underscore the difficulty of reproducing a Dehonian form of religious life in northwestern Canada and, more broadly, the strain that frontier conditions could impose on a spiritual vocation embraced within markedly different religious and social settings.

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