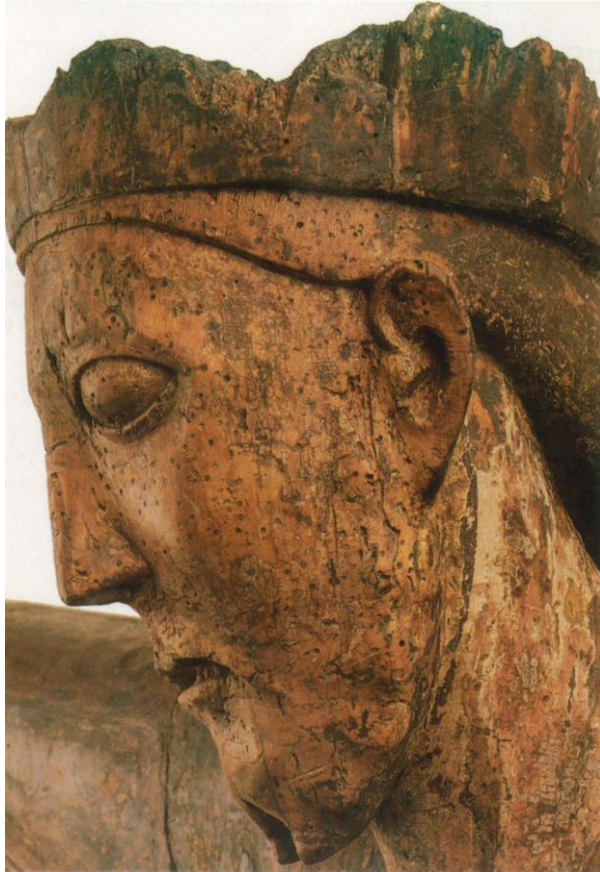


THY KINGDOM COME!



**Letter # 11 to the Congregation
on the Kingdom**

Cover illustration: The "Good old God", crucifix of the 9th century, sanctuary of Tancrémont at Pepinster (Belgium).

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In memory of Bruno Chenu, A.A. (1942-2003)

“Today the whole world is giving birth to the Kingdom of God, often in ways we do not know. To use words and then put them into practice is the way of the prophet.”

INTRODUCTION

Dear Brothers and Friends of the Alliance,

The Assumption has a motto that perfectly captures its ambition: Thy Kingdom Come!

As Fr. d'Alzon taught us, this consists in extending the Kingdom in us and around us. At the beginning of this letter, how would it possible not to recall the formula of our profession: "*out of love for Christ and in order to extend his Reign*"? We are a Congregation that is wholeheartedly apostolic and we desire to work in the world so that Jesus Christ may be known, loved, and imitated. We are also consecrated men, that is to say, men who profess to seek God throughout their lives neither tiring nor despairing. The Kingdom within us is the contemplative dimension of our mission in the world.

Today more than ever, the notion of the Kingdom or the Reign is difficult for our contemporaries to understand. The modern world is no longer able to grasp immediately the summons to which the Kingdom calls us. Even if the words of the Our Father might have introduced us to this summons, much remains unknown before it can be fully understood.

In 1943, Fr. Yves de Montcheuil, S.J., preached a retreat entitled "*The Kingdom and its demands*" in which he pointed out the misconceptions that exist in understanding the theme of the Kingdom or the Reign. He said,

"You must have an accurate idea of the Kingdom if you hope to discover the truly religious character of religion. Without

this you fall either into a sociological understanding where its very meaning is lost or into an infra-religious moralism. Morality cannot become truly religious until it is linked to that which is most profound in religion, that is to say, this idea of the Reign of God, of the Kingdom.

But precisely because this idea is not easy to grasp, it is endlessly lending itself to ever new misconceptions. To some degree the ambiguity about this matter is perpetual. As we have said, Our Lord announced a Kingdom which was not the one that the Jews were expecting nor one that men naturally expect, no matter what the period may be. As a result you have a neverending ambiguity, one that is always reemerging, one that so many Gospel parables were meant to clarify.”¹

This is why it is important to return to the beginning of the preaching of Jesus of Nazareth. It is in examining the Scriptures closely, in listening to what the Son of Man said in his teaching, in looking at what he did, that we can better understand what he is calling men to establish with unbelievable energy. The Kingdom of God goes to the heart of the Christian message.

We will also see how to put this “zeal” for the Kingdom into practice today, how to rediscover the call of the Beatitudes. But we shall also attempt to define how religious life can allow one to “savor the Kingdom”². I am convinced that the prophetic nature of religious life reveals the “already” character of the Kingdom and fosters hope in the Kingdom yet to come. By its action in the world

¹ Yves de MONTCHEUIL, “Le Royaume et ses exigences”, collection Christus n°93, Desclée de Brouwer, 2006, p.27.

² To use the title of a collection of essays under the direction of S. Robert, M. Fédou and H. Laux: “Le goût du Royaume. Dimensions de la vie religieuse”, Editions Facultés jésuites de Paris, 2016

religious life allows the Kingdom to become more and more concrete until the moment of its final coming.

It would be important for us to recapture the dynamism that permitted Emmanuel d'Alzon to consecrate his entire life to the Kingdom of God. Even if his original charism must be brought up to date, the inspiration remains the same as it did at the beginning.

A/ THE KINGDOM OF GOD IN HUMAN HISTORY

I. Jesus and the Kingdom of God

- Before Jesus: kings and prophets

Kings David and Solomon and so many others played key roles in the history of Israel. But with time the development and the experience of the kingship, which came to an end in 587 B.C., were undermined. Thus it was that there would be born an eschatological hope for the Kingdom and that expectation for it would become a constitutive element in the life of the Jewish people. The prophets would speak of the restoration of the Kingship of God. The return of the kingship with the Hasmonean dynasty would not provide satisfaction, and the Roman occupation heightened a nationalism with the hope that all the pagan nations would be vanquished. This expectation took another focus as well: all of Israel awaited the end of this world and the coming of the God-King or his representative. It is with Jesus that the messianic kingship would go back to its origins once again, however without maintaining its political overtones.

- John the Baptist

In A.D. 27-28, John the Baptist appeared on the bank of the River Jordan. He announced the imminence of the eschatological

judgment, the end of times and the wrath of God, and he administered a ritual baptism that marked a rite of passage to the eschatological community, to the true Israel. He called people to conversion. John was a prophet that castigated those who had deviated from the Covenant. His violent death bears witness to his virulence against the wicked. Jesus spent time with John and heard his message. But as Daniel Marguerat says: “John is the one who cried in the desert announcing the dawn, while Jesus is the One who ushered in the day”.

- The Kingdom in the life of Jesus

At the heart of Jesus’ message and activity was the Kingdom of God. Nevertheless, this is not defined. Jesus said that the Kingdom was coming and he invited people to conversion. The parables, the miracles, all of Jesus’ activity bear the mark of the Kingdom. The proclamation of the Kingdom is characteristic of Jesus and the formula, “Reign of God” or “Kingdom of heaven”, can be found 65 times in the gospels. While the notion of the Kingdom of God is never explained in the Scriptures, that’s because, for the Jewish world, it is taken for granted. The psalms speak of the universal kingship of God, and the Temple, where the liturgy is celebrated, is proof of the recognition of God as King of the universe. Judaism awaited the recognition of God as king by all mankind. Because the Romans had invaded their land, there was a feverish expectation among the Jewish people that the Christ would come and restore their rights. The foreign occupation raised a great longing for the Kingdom of God. The *Kaddish*, a ritual prayer of the 1st century, similar to the *Our Father*, says, “May he make his Kingdom a reality”³. The coming of the Kingdom of God

³ Marc PHILONENKO, “Le Notre Père. De la prière de Jésus à la prière des disciples”, Bibliothèque des Histoires, Gallimard, 2001, p.79

would be accompanied by the deliverance of Israel and by the destruction of her enemies. John the Baptist, before Jesus, proclaimed the coming Kingdom that required that one prepare by converting. But Jesus, for his part, did not proclaim a nationalistic Kingdom. The Kingdom of God was open to all and was not limited to the sons of Abraham. Jesus did not embrace the somber vision of the apocalypse. That is to say, he did not see the present time as being under Satan's domination. The present time was already under the loving watchfulness of God. Moreover, Jesus did not establish a timetable: the Kingdom of God is already here. "The fundamental originality of Jesus is that he believed that the Kingdom of God was, at one and the same time, future and very near — one might even say: future and present."⁴ If Jewish apocalypticism scrutinized the future so as to identify the forerunning signs of the Messiah's coming, with Jesus there was a real revolution, a radical change in understanding things. When asked "then when will the Kingdom of God come?", Jesus said in reply that the coming of the Kingdom of God could not be observed and no one could proclaim, "Look, here it is, or there it is, for, behold, the Kingdom of God is among you" (cf. Lk 17:20-21). Jesus proclaimed a Kingdom that would come unpretentious and tiny. The parables that he used described the appearance, in everyday life, of a reality that goes infinitely beyond the visible world.

"What mattered to Jesus above all was that the Kingdom of God extend its power into the present... For the apocalyptic transformation of the world did not occur. The Kingdom of God took place in a partial way through exorcisms. (...) The power of God manifested itself incompletely and not in its fullness; and it manifested itself as a power which is liberating instead of

⁴ Daniel MARGUERAT, "L'annonce du Royaume est propre à Jésus", in Joseph DORÉ, "Jésus. L'encyclopédie"; Albin Michel, 2017, p.322. (Marguerat was a professor of New Testament at the University of Lausanne)

annihilating. This is the way that the Kingdom of God enters the world, not with irresistible force and violence, not as some catastrophic event destroying everything in its wake, but with the power of persuasion that the One who liberates from possession possesses. (...) The “totally other” time of the Kingdom of God becomes a reality in the present age.”⁵ By his preaching Jesus set in motion the coming of the Kingdom of God. Exorcisms are the signs of the Kingdom present and active. Still one must learn how to perceive them as such and it is faith that makes this possible. Nor is it a matter of fleeing the present reality of the world by seeking refuge in a community awaiting the end of the world. It is because the world can change that it is possible to believe and hope.

“For Jesus, it is precisely the quality of the present that justifies hope for a universal goodness in the future. It is that fragment of the Good within the present that stirs one to place his hope in the Kingdom of God.”⁶

– After Jesus

Using the theme of the Kingdom or of the Reign would wane among the first Christians. Nevertheless, Jesus sent his disciples on mission and he invited them not only “to place their lives under the horizon of the Kingdom, but also to share its values and demands. (...) He bound them to the visibility of the Kingdom by demanding that they preach and by endowing them with the power to heal”⁷. The disciples of Christ continued the mission that

⁵ Hans WEDER. “Présent et règne de Dieu. Considérations sur la compréhension du temps chez Jésus et dans le christianisme primitif.” *Lectio divina*, CERF, 2009, pp.34-35.

⁶ *Ibidem*, pp.58-59

⁷ Daniel MARGUERAT, “Vie et destin de Jésus de Nazareth”, Seuil, 2019, p.178

Jesus had initiated by concretely manifesting the Kingdom in Word and in deed. Those sent by Jesus were the incarnation itself of the Kingdom in which they believed. As far as Paul is concerned, he doesn't use the theme of the Kingdom much, nor does the gospel of John. "This statistical observation places us in the exceptional situation of putting our finger on a distinctive formula of Jesus that was no longer passed on after him"⁸. Even if the Church focused less on the issue of the Kingdom, its mission was clearly to proclaim it. Today we are the heirs of the first disciples and how we live in the world should be distinguished by our capacity to manifest the Kingdom in us and around us. The often misinterpreted quote of Alfred Loisy — "Jesus came proclaiming the Kingdom and what arrived was the Church" — simply recalls that the mission of Christ is extended in that of the Church. It is not a question of identifying the Church with the Kingdom of God. Today our hope remains intact: then sovereignty of Christ unfolds in the world in spite of the obstacles in its path.

So there is work to be done if we are to develop a sound understanding of the Kingdom. To do so, we must remain faithful to the Gospel and, steeped in it, follow Jesus' teaching. We can describe this in a few statements:

- The Kingdom cannot be identified with one nation or one people. It is for all.
- The Kingdom is not something relegated to tomorrow; it begins today insofar as everyone is committed to it by living according to the spirit of the Beatitudes.
- The Kingdom is manifested in every effort that seeks to stave off evil.
- The Kingdom is something proposed, not imposed.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p.121

II. Emmanuel d'Alzon: a passion for the Kingdom

In 1993, in Rome, a book entitled "The Spirit of the Assumption according to Emmanuel d'Alzon" was published. Our Congregation regularly publishes some interesting texts to help us take ownership of our charism. But do we take the time to study them? This book contains a chapter of interest to this letter: "Passion for the Kingdom of God in Today's World"⁹. I have taken a couple of points from it and complemented them with a yet unpublished study by Fr. Nicolas Potteau.

Very early on, Emmanuel d'Alzon desired to contribute to the "establishment of the Kingdom of Christ". For him that meant defending the Catholic faith at a time when it was being strongly attacked. However, our founder never forgot to keep in mind how important the kingship of Christ was in the soul of believers: "The Kingdom of God within us is the most absolute dependence of our being and all our faculties on the intimate action of God. God is the master; we are the subjects" (*Foundational Documents*, "First Letter to the Master of Novices", trans. Fr. Richard Richards, Milton, Massachusetts, p. 101). Fr. d'Alzon began this way of self-abandonment in order to allow God to take hold of him. He gave himself totally to the Trinity. Fr. Nicolas Potteau has remarked that there may have been some influence from the Catechism of the Council of Trent (1542-1563) on the thinking of our founder. The idea that Fr. d'Alzon had of the Kingdom of God ---- or rather the Kingdom of Christ which can often be found in his writings before the *Instruction of 1868* ---- does in fact take up what is taught in the Catechism of the Council of Trent. This catechism states that when one prays the Our Father, one prays (1) that the

⁹ Lucien GUISSARD and Claude MARÉCHAL, "Passion for the Kingdom of God in Today's World" in "The Spirit of Assumption according to Emmanuel d'Alzon", Rome, 1993, pp.49-56.

Kingdom of Christ come about in us by the theological virtues, and (2) that the Church spread and that “bad Christians” become “good Christians”. So one finds the Kingdom of Christ in us (Christ reigns through faith, hope, and charity) and around us (the Church spreads).

Emmanuel d’Alzon meditated on Lk 17:21 where Jesus says that the Kingdom is “within us”, and he relied on this affirmation of Christ to ask that all strive to make the interior Kingdom grow within them. “Before endeavoring to establish his Kingdom over others, make sure it is firmly established over yourselves. Become aware of the fact that besides the exterior kingdom, there is also an interior kingdom.” (*Écrits spirituels*, p.663). It is the personal experience of Fr. d’Alzon that leads to his spiritual reflections. It is not possible to be a good apostle unless Christ first reigns in the heart of a missionary.

The *Rule of Life* of the Assumption takes up this teaching so that the action of God in us might be the fruit of the total gift to his call. It is also important to point out that “our common life, with reference to Jesus Christ and his Gospel, and our vows underline the ultimate meaning of human realities and are the sign of the Kingdom already present and still to come. (RL 25, 26, 32, 33, 34, 38, 40, 43)”¹⁰

Emmanuel d’Alzon was concerned that in the French society of his day God and his rights were no longer respected. He would defend the cause of God that, in his mind, could alone allow for the defense of the interests of man. The Kingdom of God allows justice, peace, and social harmony to be brought about. D’Alzon would envision works to rechristianize society and, first of all, through education. However, he would also get involved in the press,

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p.52.

preaching, the unity of the Church in the Near East, working-class activities, vocations, pilgrimages, etc. He would always keep his eyes open for new areas where he could get his small congregation involved. But to be faithful to our founder today, we must be capable of going out to new frontiers and peripheries. None of this can take place without a concern for the poor and the forgotten of our societies.

III. The Kingdom among you, the Kingdom in you?

“No one will announce, ‘Look, here it is,’ or, ‘There it is.’¹¹ For behold, the kingdom of God is among you.” (Lk 17:21)

Much ink has been spilled over this verse of the gospel of Luke. In fact, the translation is difficult. Some translate it, “within you”, and others “among you”. Nathalie Siffer summarizes the debate: “The interpretation of this *logion* is much debated because of the uncertainty surrounding the meaning of the expression *entos hûmon*: interioristic (“within you”, “inside you”), communitarian (“among you”, “in your midst”), activist (“at your disposition”, “within your reach”). The ecclesial interpretation is uncontested, “the Kingdom is among you”, which is actually preferred by translators and exegetes, but also by theologians. However, it is without a doubt important to make clear that these concepts, although distinct, are not opposed and to some extent can be related”¹¹

For us, Assumptionists, we can feel entirely at ease with the variety of interpretations. Our spirituality confirms that we are at

¹¹ Nathalie SIFFER, “La proclamation du Royaume de Dieu” in Ch. THEOBALD(dir.) “Pourquoi l’Église. La dimension ecclésiale de la foi dans l’horizon du salut”, Bayard, 2014, pp110-111

once seeking the Kingdom already present in us, but that we also want to spread it among us and around us. So we can affirm that our search for the Kingdom is simultaneously personal, communitarian, and ecclesial. We cannot limit our reading to an intimist view, since it is at once the foundation of our life of prayer and our action in the world. The Kingdom for every Assumptionist is a communitarian reality to be built every day by living the spirit of the Beatitudes. Therefore, it has a social dimension, even a political one.

It is essential that we maintain the tension between the coming of the Kingdom in us and its coming around us. This is a creative tension and it is the basis of a dynamic placed under the sign of the Spirit. No one can pretend to cooperate in the coming of the Kingdom if he forgets one of these two fundamental aspects.

Another key aspect is the coming of the Kingdom “among us”. We are to honor the community dimension of the Kingdom and that happens when we build up the Body of Christ in community, in the Church, and in the world. The community is a place of evangelization and we cannot forget to commit a significant part of our apostolic energy to it.

It is urgent that we restore what is called the Examen of the Kingdom. Fr. d’Alzon gained great insight into himself by practicing this exercise of rereading his life. It has been updated by some of our brothers; I am thinking of Fr. Benoît Bigard and Fr. Edgar Bourque. It would be good to use it regularly. Spreading the Kingdom of God entails a combat against evil....evil present in the world and that which exists in our hearts.

IV. The Church and the Kingdom

After Jesus' preaching came to a close, the theme of the Kingdom gradually began to fade in Christian communities. It did not disappear, and the underlying idea remained, that Jesus is the concrete manifestation of the Kingdom and that the Church that proclaims it extends it on the earth. The Kingdom is not completely identified with the Church, but often there can arise a certain confusion. The triumph of the Church would be the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth. Even if this interpretation is no longer accepted unanimously today, there are still Christians who continue to affirm the saying, "outside of the Church, no salvation". The Church contributes to the manifestation of the Kingdom and it is also the concrete sign of it, but it is not the Kingdom. We have to reflect on the place of the Church in the proclamation of the Kingdom; we will do so more particularly by reflecting on it "as the universal sacrament of salvation", such as it is defined in the dogmatic constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (#48), or in *Gaudium et spes* as well:

"While helping the world and receiving many benefits from it, the Church has a single intention: that God's kingdom may come, and that the salvation of the whole human race may come to pass. For every benefit which the People of God during its earthly pilgrimage can offer to the human family stems from the fact that the Church is "the universal sacrament of salvation", simultaneously manifesting and exercising the mystery of God's love."¹²

Is the Church the sacrament of the Kingdom?

¹² *Gaudium et spes*, #45

Vatican II does not use this expression. Of course, the sacraments precede the existence of the Church since they were instituted by Jesus Christ; but we know as well, with the teaching of the Fathers, taken up once again by Cardinal de Lubac, that “the Eucharist makes the Church and the Church makes the Eucharist”. The teaching of Vatican II speaks of the community of Christians as the sacrament of salvation for the world. The Protestant Churches are reluctant to use the expression, “sacrament of the Kingdom” to speak of the Church, and the Catholic Church takes pains not to offend them. Nevertheless, it is legitimate to acknowledge that the Church contains the seed of the Kingdom in it by virtue of the sacraments and the proclamation of the Gospel. It cannot be identified with the Kingdom, but it is its beginning.

At the Assumption we love the Church with a passion. Fr. Emmanuel d’Alzon transmitted this love to us. However, we do not make an idol of the Church. Pope Francis regularly insists that the Church be a poor Church for the poor, a Church attentive to the peripheries and not self-referential, a Church open to the world.

Our love for the Church must be total; however it should not lack lucidity. The Church, although willed by God and loved by him, is a reality that is mixed and impure. As St. Augustine would say, it is a mixture of the good and the wicked, *ecclesia permixta*. We must always contribute to its holiness while getting rid of all that contributes to its ugliness. Our lucidity should allow us to fight against the evils that have struck at it very core and today it wouldn’t be useful to dwell at length on the long list of its sins. In fact, we are aware, the Church is an instrument in the plan of salvation willed by God; it is not the goal of the Kingdom nor is it identifiable with the Kingdom. It exists for the Kingdom.

Already Augustine said that the Church was greater than the reality we can see and that there were men that belonged to it

without being in its visible sphere. He also said that it limped along because of the bad elements in it. Christians limp along, but so does the Church: “For the time being the Church is lame. It puts one foot down firmly; the other one, being crippled, it drags. Look at the pagans, bothers. Sometimes they find good Christians serving God, and they admire them and are attracted and believe. Sometimes they notice those who are living bad lives and they say, “Look at these Christians!” But these evil-livers belong to the hollow of Jacob’s thigh which was touched, and they are withered. Yet the touch of the Lord is the hand of the Lord, chastising and giving life.”¹³

So, do we need the Church to bring the Kingdom about? I believe that the Church is willed by God. He loves it as a bride and desires its holiness. But the Church is not an ‘alternative society’. It is the sacrament of salvation, a mystery. As Bruno Chenu stated it: “The Church is not an alternative society in a corrupt world, a ‘refill’ solution. It confesses its dependence with regard to man and society in search of meaning and, above all, of a God whom she presents as the fulfillment of history”¹⁴ This Church that we love needs reform and successive Popes, Benedict XVI and Francis, have set about doing so. The task is enormous given how great the inertia is. One must develop the virtue of patience, as the theologian Yves Congar called for in his famous book of 1950: *True and False Reform in the Church*. By patience he understood, “a certain spiritual attitude, a sense of the indispensable delays of God, of the Church, and of life, and a certain humility and flexibility, a certain disposition of self-criticism, an awareness of human imperfections and shortcomings, and a certain reservation

¹³ Saint Augustine, sermon #5, in AHI, *The Works of St. Augustine*, Part III, Vol. 1, 223.

¹⁴ Bruno CHENU, “L’Église au cœur”, Bayard, 2019, p.60.

with regard to simplistic solutions about everything and nothing (...) All reform is to some extent an anticipation of the eschatological kingdom, of its justice and its purity”¹⁵

The Church, universal sacrament of salvation by virtue of its sacraments and the proclamation of the Word, has been wounded by scandals. How can one believe in its sacramentality when its holiness is lacking?

The Church must be repaired, according to Fr. Dominique Greiner, after analyzing letters he received to the editor of the newspaper “La Croix”¹⁶, expressing both the dismay of Catholic faithful and their hope for renewal.

The Church is necessary for the proclamation of the Kingdom, but it is not the Kingdom. In spite of its imperfections and sinfulness, it was willed by God to reveal to the world his mercy and tenderness. This has been well understood by Pope Francis who has committed himself to its progressive reform. This will take time. For us Assumptionists, it is important that, to the best of our ability, we contribute to this renewal.

¹⁵ Joseph FAMERÉE, “Vraie ou fausse réforme ecclésiale: quels sont les critères ? La réflexion du père Yves Congar, o.p.” in J. Famerée et G. Routhier, “Penser la réforme de l’Église”. Unam sanctam, nouvelle série, 2021, p.22

¹⁶ Dominique GREINER, “Réparons l’Église. Scandales, abus, révélations”, Bayard, 2020.

B/ WORKING FOR THE KINGDOM TODAY

I. The Kingdom and unity

Today more than ever, the division between Christians is a major obstacle to evangelization. Since Vatican II the Church has resolutely committed itself to ecumenical dialogue. The Council underscored the damage that had been done by disunity: as a result, “the radiance of the Church's image is less clear in the eyes of our separated brethren and of the world at large, and the growth of God's kingdom is delayed.”¹⁷ In its modest way Assumption has contributed to the effort of rapprochement between Christians of different confessions. We must undertake new efforts if we want to be seen as credible in the eyes of our contemporaries. The lack of unity hinders the growth of the Kingdom.

I see three aspects of unity that we are called to develop. First, personal unity. A religious is a man at one within himself. The divisions that appear in the heart of a man are the temptations of one who is bad. Every divided heart has its faith in God, its hope, and its charity toward brothers and sisters threatened. Saint Augustine liked to make it clear that the origin of the original word for monk, in Greek *monos*, did not mean first of all “alone”, but “one”. The monk is an individual who is at one within himself.... a being who in his faith in God has found unity of heart. We know with the psalmist that God “hates everyone with a divided heart” (Ps 119:113).

We must also work for unity within our communities. Here too, Augustinian teaching is important. The Rule of our patriarch reminds us that we are brothers seeking unity of mind and heart

¹⁷ *Unitatis redintegratio* #4

“one mind and one heart intent on God”. Are our communities signs of that Kingdom without borders that Jesus proclaimed? Are our social, cultural, and ethnic differences “good news” for today’s world? Or are they instead obstacles to evangelization? How does the Assumption, religious and lay, bear witness to the reconciliation, unity and joy of belonging to the same kingdom?

Finally, the ideal of universal fraternity spurs us on to seek unity in the midst of diversity. It is not a question of eliminating differences, of reducing the particularities among us but of respecting diversity even as we build unity. Ecumenism means working at this task. The Groupe des Dombes, which brings together French-speaking Protestant and Catholic theologians, published a commentary on the Our Father from which I have taken this reflection on “Thy Kingdom Come”:

“This demand of the Kingdom reminds us not only of the urgency of bringing about Unity and of our collaboration in doing so, but also of its inevitable stages. We are invited to recognize with wonder what God has already given to his Church in its varied traditions, what God has given to this or that Christian Community that is not “mine”. This gift which already exists and is yet to come is my Church as Church that is also called to be acknowledged with wonder in the other Churches. My Church is thus decentered, centered as it must be on the Kingdom that exists and is yet to come, good news proclaimed by Jesus. It is called upon to pray with the other Christian Churches and for them with a view to Unity. More broadly it is called upon to lead its life, not independently, but with the permanent awareness of the

other Christian Churches, with a concerted effort to live the Gospel with them.”¹⁸

So it is urgent that we get involved in working for the unity of the Church. The Assumption must dedicate itself to this task. This will happen by a renewal of ecumenical, ecclesiological, and patristic studies in our formation program and the choice of specializations, but also by a concrete involvement in a dialogue with pastors and faithful of other Christian confessions. It is not good that we remain where we are while awaiting the Parousia.

The 33rd general chapter reminded us that our charism is “at the service of unity in a divided world” (cf. Acts #1-20, among others). We are men and women with a passion for the Kingdom of God, already present but not fully. Our work leads us not to count the cost in the cause of unity.

Emmanuel d’Alzon understood well that the unity of the Church was an indispensable task if the Gospel was to remain credible in the eyes of our world. The Kingdom of God could not come about unless all believers were united, gathered into one sole community. To be sure, he did not speak of ecumenism and his efforts targeted the conversion of schismatics and that of heretics, but his passion for unity drove him to find ways to manifest the Kingdom of God in this world.

Today we look at things from a different angle. The Second Vatican Council opened ways other than those of the pure and simple reintegration of the other Christian realities into the Catholic Church. To be sure, we want a Church that is truly catholic, but the roads to unity from now on pass by respect for legitimate differences. This is what it means to live catholicity.

¹⁸ Groupe des Dombes, “Vous donc, priez ainsi”. (Mt 6,9). Le Notre Père, itinéraire pour la conversion des Églises. Bayard, 2011, p.136.

Pope Francis likes to speak of the image of the polyhedron, that geometrical figure that expresses, in his eyes, what it is that is to be promoted. It is a question of fostering the union of differences in a coexistence that enriches all the various facets, “where all complement each other, but where each maintains its specificity and thus each enriches the others”.

II. Community life: presence and proclamation of the Kingdom.

Martin Buber, a philosopher of dialogue and relationships, well known for his book, *I and Thou*, sheds an interesting light on the notion of community with a connection to the Kingdom. In a conference¹⁹ given in 1930, he develops an original vision of the call to become community that resides in the human species. “The world itself has a nostalgic desire to become community”, he says, and then adds that this nostalgic desire is thus inscribed by virtue of Creation itself. Martin Buber thinks that the ideal of community is the destiny of the human species in order that humanity be achieved. “Thus the world and the human species are predisposed by Creation to become community.”

“If we seek to grasp the meaning of the great religious phrase, *Malkhout shamayin* (“the Kingdom of heaven”) — perhaps the greatest religious phrase designating the world — not from above but from below, that is to say taking ourselves and our own lives as the starting point, it means precisely that the world, or the human species, is destined to become an authentic, lasting community, embracing everything.”

¹⁹ Martin BUBER, *Wie kann Gemeinschaft werden?* in “Communauté”, Éditions de l'éclat, 2018.

This conference opens the way to understanding the idea that Martin Buber was making of the Kingdom of heaven or the Kingdom of God. Humanity, in order to be fully realized in the order of Creation, is destined to become a community. I believe this insight is profound and that it can help us to understand how the Kingdom of God can come among us. It consists in achieving the union of the human race. Buber distinguishes society, that is a union of interests, from community that is a union of life. He makes this beautiful declaration of faith when he says, "I believe in a humanity that is in the act of becoming. I believe that all of humanity, all of Creation, precisely because it is Creation, is wired to become community, and the whole world, without exception, can become the place where God is manifest."

Personally I am very moved by this way of speaking of the Kingdom, which, coming from Judaism, is connected to a vision that we can have in Christianity. It is a matter of an eschatological waiting, but also of an involvement in the present. Buber adds this, "I likewise believe that the goal of Creation is inextricably linked to the decisions that we are taking at this very moment, at every moment. It is useful and important that we understand that in our most ordinary day-to-day existence there is no extraordinary moment where the redemption of the world would not be connected to our daily life".

This summons to get involved here and now should strike a vibrant chord within us since we have made the choice of building up a community of life and not one of interests.... a community that has as its goal the coming of the Kingdom of God. Buber concludes his conference by a summons to holiness: "Holiness, the way towards God, occurs when a man does *what he must do in the here and now*, when he does it in purity and holiness (...). In everything we undergo hour after hour in our daily lives, God is

addressing us, and explicitly us (...) It is here that we make efforts at achieving holiness, that we can advance along the way to God. If it doesn't happen here, then it will occur nowhere."

I believe that we are able to hear this summons which invites us to build that authentic community which God desires and which bears the name "Kingdom of heaven". We are called to be "experts of communion" since, as Bruno Chenu has written, "The plan of God is none other than to gather all men into one large fraternal body where Christ is the head. Already buds of the Kingdom of God are blossoming wherever any kind of community is formed."²⁰

Our *Rule of Life* has captured what is essential in this message when it develops the numbers concerning religious vows. Poverty, chastity, and obedience are presented as "signs of the Kingdom".

Religious community life, a community of life and of a shared destiny, is called to be a visible sign of the coming Kingdom. I like to recall what a former master of novices, Fr. Camille Durand, liked to say. At the end of his life he would say that he loved community life more and more because it prepared him to live in God who is a community of love.

In such a way, he recaptured the great insights of St. Augustine ("when you see charity, you see the Trinity") and of Emmanuel d'Alzon.

²⁰ Bruno CHENU, "L'urgence prophétique", Bayard, 1997, p.283.

III. Preaching the Kingdom after the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID pandemic has brought to light the vulnerabilities of our globalized world. The spread of the virus throughout the world reminds us that we are all affected and that no one can pretend to be untouched. Perhaps we have never been so intensely aware of the solidarity to which we are called whether that be in the trials we face or in the solutions that we are to find for them.

The world after COVID cannot be the same as the one that existed before it. Radical reform and change are necessary. Such transformation has something to do with the coming Kingdom of God. At the Assumption we have to be aware of the orientations this Kingdom provides in order to work for its coming today.

Pope Francis gave a weekly series of catecheses (from August 5 to September 30, 2020) during his Wednesday general audiences at the Vatican. Broadcast from the Library of the Apostolic Palace because of the health measures in place, the Pope presented a strong message to guide us toward a more responsible fraternity. He called this catechesis, “Healing the world”. The world is certainly touched by evil; the hope of the Kingdom, which is the heart of the Christian faith, enables us to work for its healing and liberation.

The crisis has uncovered our vulnerabilities and has particularly struck the poor. “Thus, we must keep our gaze firmly fixed on Jesus: in the midst of this pandemic, our eyes on Jesus; and with this *faith* embrace the *hope* of the Kingdom of God that Jesus Himself brings us. A Kingdom of healing and of salvation that is already present in our midst. A Kingdom of justice and of peace that is manifested through works of *charity*, which in their turn

increase hope and strengthen faith.”²¹ Pope Francis lists the principles which form the basis for the healing of the world. They come directly from the Gospel and the teachings of the Magisterium.

“So we can ask ourselves: today, in what way can we help heal our world? As disciples of the Lord Jesus, who is the physician of our souls and bodies, we are called to continue “His work, work of healing and salvation” in a physical, social and spiritual sense.” The Pope goes on by citing the principles that can help us move forward in order to prepare the kind of future we need: “the principle of the dignity of the person, the principle of the common good, the principle of the preferential option for the poor, the principle of the universal destination of goods, the principle of the solidarity, of subsidiarity, the principle of the care for our common home.”²²

The Kingdom proposed by the faith is a Kingdom of healing and of salvation, a kingdom of justice and peace. Yet this Kingdom will not come except in the measure that we are ready to welcome it, but also to contribute concretely to its coming. To this end, Christians are called to emphasize the following principles:

– Human dignity

We have been created as persons who are loved and capable of loving, Pope Francis says. Therefore, we have a unique dignity which demands that we live in communion with God and with our brothers and sisters. In the Gospel Jesus invites his disciples to abandon the mindset of domination and enter into one of service. “The human being, indeed, in his or her personal dignity, is a social

²¹ Pope Francis, “Healing the world” ; general audience of August 5, 2020.

²² *ibid.*

being, created in the image of God, One and Triune. We are social beings; we need to live in this social harmony”²³ Faith in God motivates us to combat indifference in the face of violations to human dignity and not to succumb to a throwaway culture. “Faith always requires that we let ourselves be healed and converted from our individualism, whether personal or collective; party individualism, for example”.²⁴

- The preferential option for the poor and the virtue of charity

Francis reminds us that the teaching of the Beatitudes is addressed first of all to the poor. Jesus stood among the sick, the poor and the excluded and showed them the merciful love of God. “He took risks to be near to the poor”.²⁵ The Pope likewise called to mind that we will all be judged and the criterion will be our love of the poor. “Some mistakenly think that this preferential love for the poor is a task for the few, but in reality it is the mission of the Church as a whole”²⁶.

I particularly like the fact that the Pope reminds us that we will not return to the “normality” that existed before the crisis, that “normality” where social injustices and the degradation of the environment were rife. “The pandemic is a crisis, and we do not emerge from a crisis the same as before: either we come out of it better, or we come out of it worse”. The opportunity is there and we must get on with the task. “The preferential option for the poor, this ethical-social need that comes from God’s love (cf. *LS*,

²³ Pope Francis, “Healing the world”; general audience, Wednesday, August 12, 2020.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Pope Francis, “Healing the world”; general audience, Wednesday, August 19, 2020.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

158), inspires us to conceive of and design an economy where people, and especially the poorest, are at the center.”²⁷. To this end Francis gives us some practical advice: “I propose that this be done by starting from the love of God, placing the peripheries at the center and the last in first place.”

– The universal destination of goods and the virtue of hope

The pandemic has aggravated inequalities. The richest get richer, the poorest lose the little they have. For the Pope, inequalities reveal the existence of a virus that stems from a “sick economy”. He returns to the conviction he stated in *Laudato Si'*: “Social inequality and environmental degradation go together and have the same root (cf *Laudato Si'*, 101): the sin of wanting to possess and wanting to dominate over one’s brothers and sisters, of wanting to possess and dominate nature and God himself.”²⁸. Francis rightly calls to mind that the earth was here before us and that it was given to the whole human race and not just a few. We are stewards (usufructuaries), administrators and not masters. “We forget that, being created in the image and likeness of God, we are social, creative and solidary beings with an immense capacity to love. (...) We flourish in community”²⁹. Therefore we need to reinforce a common quest to give birth to a better world with the willingness to share what we have with our brothers and sisters. This approach to social justice cannot be undertaken without safeguarding creation.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Pope Francis, “Healing the world”; general audience, Wednesday, August 26, 2020.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

– Solidarity and the virtue of faith

The pandemic has highlighted our interdependence: “we are all connected to each other, for better or for worse.”. This is how Francis begins his 5th catechesis on the theme, “Healing the world”. He underlines the principle of solidarity. Even if the word seems worn, it is important. “It presumes the creation of a new mindset which thinks in terms of community and the priority of the life of all over the appropriation of goods by a few (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, 188).”³⁰. Therefore it is a matter of justice. We must pass from the curse of Babel to the blessing of Pentecost, that is to say, to pass from the ignorance of what unites us to a community united in diversity and solidarity.

– Love and the common good

The Pope believes that “we will emerge from it (the pandemic) for the better if we all seek the *common good* together; otherwise, we will emerge for the worse....we must decide”, and if we wish to emerge for the better, it will happen when we all seek the common good together. Basing itself on the love that comes from God in the first place and that we have as a mission to extend around us, the notion of the common good rests on this love that comes before us “...each person’s true good is a common good, not only individual, and, vice versa, the common good is a true good for the person.”³¹. Christian love is a love above all frontiers, borders, and distinctions. It opens the door to building a healthy, inclusive, just and peaceful society founded on the “rock of the common good”.

³⁰ Pope Francis, “Healing the world”; general audience, Wednesday, September 2, 2020.

³¹ Pope Francis, “Healing the world”; general audience, Wednesday, September 9, 2020.

– Safeguarding our common home and maintaining a contemplative attitude

In the context of the pandemic we have learned or learned anew to care for the most vulnerable: the elderly and the alone, the sick and the weakest. In the Pope's eyes, this care shown to others is "a Christian and a human wealth." But Francis, taking up what he had already said before, especially in *Laudato Si*, makes clear that "we must also extend this care to our common home". The best vaccine for the misuse of our earth, of "our common home is contemplation". It's good for us to remember the place of contemplation in order to see, with eyes full of gratitude, the richness and diversity of our earth. To reduce it to goods of consumption, to energy, or to immediately usable resources is a sin. "Contemplation heals the soul", the Pope adds, because it allows us "to see the earth as a gift and not as something to be exploited for profit"³². Lastly, *contemplating and caring*: these are two attitudes that show the way to correct and re-balance our relationship as human beings with creation.

– Subsidiarity and the virtue of hope

The principle of subsidiarity is for the Pope "a social principle that makes us more united."³³ Francis regrets that this principle which aims at delegating to lower levels a capacity of decision-making when this is possible is not sufficiently taken into consideration in the modern world: "the powerful are listened to more than the weak, and this is not the way, it is not the human

³² Pope Francis, "Healing the world"; general audience, Wednesday, September 16, 2020.

³³ Pope Francis, "Healing the world"; general audience, Wednesday, September 23, 2020.

way, it is not the way that Jesus taught us, it is not implementing the principle of subsidiarity.” Everyone must be an agent in his own redemption. Therefore, it is necessary to respect everyone’s autonomy and capacity to take initiative, especially those of the least. In respecting this principle, hope can be concretely manifested in the life of human beings. Hope is boldness and it invites us to dream based on the ideals of justice and love.

This catechesis, developed over more than a month, is a vade-mecum that permits us to envisage our participation in the coming of the Kingdom of God. The principles which Pope Francis gives express anew the spirit of the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes are the the real program for establishing the Kingdom. When the Pope speaks of human dignity, the safeguarding of creation, the common good, and solidarity.....he is directly drawing his inspiration from the Beatitudes and the great scene of the Last Judgment in Matthew 25. Blessed are the poor, the Kingdom of heaven is theirs! What is important is to have “one’s eyes fixed on Jesus” (Heb 12: 2) in order to be able to give new life to society and above all “not to return to the so-called ‘normality’ that is a sick normality.”

For Francis, “The normality to which we are called is that of the Kingdom of God, where “the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up and the poor have good news preached to them” (*Mt* 11:5).... In the normality of the Kingdom of God, there is bread for all and more to spare, social organization is based on contributing, sharing and distributing, not on possessing, excluding and accumulating (cf. *Mt* 14:13-21).”³⁴

³⁴ Pope Francis, “Healing the world”; general audience, Wednesday, September 30, 2020.

IV. Changing Church structures to better bear witness to the Kingdom

Sixty years after the Second Vatican Council a new wind is blowing in Rome with the pontificate of Pope Francis. He is the first pope who might be considered as the fruit of the Council, that is to say, a man who has integrated and developed the teaching of Vatican II. For him, there is no need to cite it continuously; from now on it is a matter of implementing it here and now...

Francis has on many occasions hammered home his desire for synodality, collegiality, and subsidiarity. It is the core of his teaching on the life of the Church. I believe that we must listen to him so that we may be credible in the world in order for the Gospel to be heard at last. The Church can no longer function on the model of a theocratic kingship. The pyramidal structure, put in place over the centuries with the pope at the top and the faithful underneath, is no longer credible in the eyes of our contemporaries in the light of the Gospel. Therefore, we must find a more fraternal way to function, less centralized and more open to debate and the broad participation of all. To do so, it is necessary to make even more room for local Churches and particular Churches. It is a matter of constituting a communion of partner and sister Churches assuring unity through charity and under the charge (*“vigilance”*) of the pope. In 1982, Bruno Chenu wrote: “Catholicism has not yet experienced a real synod in Rome”³⁵ and he added that a synod was yet to be invented. I believe that Pope Francis is looking for ways to do this in his various recent initiatives: invitation of laypersons, a religious sister as undersecretary of the synod, wide consultation of the faithful before the meeting, etc. It is necessary that the Church be

³⁵ Bruno CHENU, “L’Église au cœur”, Bayard, 2019 (re-edited), p.347.

declericalized because the future will be that of a Church where the laity takes into their hands the destiny of Christianity. This also means taking the role of women into account in the concrete life of our various meetings and organizations.

Ecumenism will advance thanks to a reform in collegiality and it is very possible that we will have to learn something from the functioning of the Orthodox Churches in this particular regard.

V. To dialogue and to proclaim the Kingdom in a secular world

Proclaiming the Kingdom in a secularized and post-Christian society represents a real challenge. We are often faced either with polite indifference or outright aggressivity when we present the fundamentals of our Christian faith. But we need not capitulate because the Spirit is at work in the silence of hearts and in the depths of consciences. You know how much I admire the Protestant theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Already during the Nazi persecution he understood that the world was becoming areligious. His question will always resonate with those who do not despair: how can Jesus be the Lord of the non-religious?

“In a sermon that he was unable to deliver for the baptism of the son of his friend, Bethge, he states that “the old words must fade away” (literally: *weaken or cease to be heard*), and he says:

A day will come when men will be called once again to proclaim the Word of God in such a way that the world will be transformed and renewed by it. It will be a new language, perhaps completely non-religious [unreligiös], but liberating and redemptive, as that of Christ was; men will be shocked by it and, nevertheless, overcome by its power; it will be the language of a new

justice and truth that will proclaim that God and men are reconciled and that the Kingdom is approaching [...].”³⁶

Dietrich Bonhoeffer understood that our world had “grown up” and that the traditional discourse of religion had no power over it. God could no longer be considered as the answer to difficult questions that would one day, thanks to science, come up with a yet unknown truth. Man is immersed in the “next-to-last” things but there are human tasks to be accomplished that are not religious problems per se. Working in the world with Christ — the man for others — Jesus can then become the “Lord of the non-religious” for the man of this age.

Today philosophers and thinkers marked by agnosticism or atheism envisage the possibility of finding in Christianity riches necessary for the life of man. They readily speak of the “resources of Christianity”³⁷ without embracing the faith. We might mention Marcel Gauchet for whom it was clear that Christianity was the religion of “the release from religion”³⁸. We know of other thinkers coming from different cultural backgrounds like the Italian Gianni Vattimo³⁹ in Italy or Charles Taylor in Canada, who accept their Catholicism while integrating the secularity of the world. Another philosopher, a specialist in the Chinese world, François Jullien, seeks “to put an end to this avoidance of the question of Christianity in contemporary thought”. He poses this question:

³⁶ Arnaud CORRIC, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Le Christ, Seigneur des non-religieux” in “Études”, tome 394, 2001, p.371.

³⁷ François JULLIEN, “Ressources du christianisme. Mais sans y entrer par la foi”, L’Herne, 2018.

³⁸ Marcel GAUCHET, “Le désenchantement du monde”, Gallimard, 1985.

³⁹ Gianni VATTIMO, “Après la chrétienté. Pour un christianisme non religieux”, Calmann-Lévy, 2004.

“what *has* Christianity *done to thought?*” He proposes entering into Christian thought “without the prerequisite of the faith”.

It is good for us to recall that the Second Vatican Council invited us to dialogue with the world, including non-believers. I believe that this dialogue contributes to the hastening of the Kingdom of God and it allows us to receive, learn, and deepen our faith. The secular city can help our faith grow by stimulating our thinking.

François Jullien has a rather challenging philosophical reflection on the theme of the Kingdom, of Love, and of the Other. He thinks that by his love for the world and by the related affirmation that he is not of this world Jesus helps to bring into being a subject who is “able to be in the other”. A subject capable “of not ‘envying’, of not ‘being inflated’, of not seeking its own interests’ (I Cor 13)”. For him, this love is a resource that fosters an absolute which is different from that of Greek philosophy or that of Chinese wisdom; it is a love that is unconditional to the end.

An interview with the newspaper “La Croix” allows one to get a clearer understanding of his thinking about the Kingdom: “John says ‘My kingdom is not of this world’, that one can in fact read as a rejection of the world. I think this is a mistake, because the evangelist means to say something else. It is not a rejection of the world, because God loves the world. But the world signifies a comprehensiveness of belonging. So it is a kind of enclosure. To exist, in the Christian sense, invites one, while at the same time being in the world, to stand outside the world. It is not only a fantastic opportunity; it is the only path to real encounter”⁴⁰. And he continues, “the encounter with the other takes place outside

⁴⁰ François JULLIEN, www.la-croix.com/Debats/Forum-et-debats/Francois-Jullien-LEurope-sait-quoi-faire-christianisme-2018-06-11-1200946237

the world....an 'elsewhere' where the other comes from. In this world Jesus opens another dimension, to be precise, the dimension of the Other. The resource of Christianity offers the possibility of getting out of oneself, of withdrawing from self-enclosure."

I think that we have here, in a secular and non-religious form, a relevant definition of the Kingdom, that is, openness to the Other.

Another thinker, Marcel Gauchet, asks the question, "Why the Church"? He, the theorist of the withdrawal from religion, acknowledges the primordial role that Christianity played in bringing the world to secularization. Marcel Gauchet does not reject, however, the role of the Church, even for the contemporary world. Recognizing the contribution of Christianity in allowing the earthly city to acquire its autonomy, he makes it clear that it is not a question of the Church's opposing this city, noting that the believer is both in the world and outside of it. "To the contrary, the Christian city accommodates itself to the existing city. It acknowledges its validity and it even recommends that it submit to its laws. It is of another order. It dwells within the existing city in view of a superior end, which is the expectation of the heavenly kingdom. In other words, the Christian message implies the need to create society, but a society of an unheard of nature, a society that is not meant to be a separate society but a counter-society within the established society."⁴¹

Thus Marcel Gauchet recognizes the relevance of Christianity even in the current context of secularization. Like François Jullien, it does not necessarily mean embracing the

⁴¹ Marcel GAUCHET, "Une histoire qui n'aurait jamais dû avoir lieu", in Roselyne DUPONT-ROC et Antoine GUGGENHEIM, "Après Jésus. L'invention du christianisme", Albin Michel, 2020, pp.631-632.

Christian faith personally, but to maintain a gratefulness for that which Christianity has brought to the world, but also to still expect much of it in order that man continue to grow. Does this not also mean awaiting the coming of the Kingdom?

In the face of the secular reality of the world, in the face of this world that “has grown up”, we have to be ready to adapt so that Jesus may always be proclaimed and better known. This is an enormous challenge. It will entail renewal in the formation of religious and lay people. Cardinal Braz de Aviz has drawn the attention of consecrated men and women to the secularization that is taking place in our societies so that we can take it into account in formation and in our mission.

“The secularity of culture — which is falling into secularization — raises from the outset a question that remains valid today for theological reflection, for witness and Christian proclamation, and, in a privileged way, for the formation to mission. One can speak of a pedagogy of secularity, that is to say, of an attentiveness whereby the entire person is taught to live in the world with a Christian soul, seeking out the creative imprint that God has stamped there. This process that we can define as a process of the generative wisdom of gospel life should be included in the formation of consecrated men and women according to their specific form of life.”⁴²

It is not a matter of fleeing the reality of the world and of escaping into the dream of some Christian ideal, but of

⁴² Cardinal Braz de Aviz, “Annoncez”, lettre aux consacrés et consacrées, témoins de l’Évangile parmi les nations. 29 juin 2016, §64.

rediscovering the vitality of the apostles while living in the world as it is but with our indomitable hope and faith in the future. Yet this will happen only if a creative conversion occurs. We have to rethink our way of doing things and probably, as well, the organization, the goals, the structures, the style and the evangelizing methods of our own communities.

“Rethinking structures often leads to setting aside those that already exist in that they are no longer adequate for conveying the beauty of the Good News. It is urgent that we come up with a new language so that the gospel may be understood. Transposing the Gospel and the magisterium of the Church into words, images, and symbols that speak to today’s cultures is a daunting task given the lack of the Christian memory of many of our contemporaries ----they have little idea of its meaning and a total lack of a frame of reference.

The models and the habits we’ve developed for speaking of and expressing the identity and the values of the consecrated life risk becoming obscure and incomprehensible to the vast majority of people: “I hope that all communities will devote the necessary effort to advancing along the path of a pastoral and missionary conversion”⁴³.

By taking up the call of Pope Francis in *Evangelii gaudium* (#25), Cardinal Braz de Aviz reminds us of the need of changing our ways of acting and thinking in order for the Kingdom to be proclaimed.

⁴³ *ibid.*, § 72

The acknowledgement of a just secular autonomy does not mean that the Law of God is rejected. Among our contemporaries there are many who think that the Law of God is subjugated to the Law of the City. This is not compatible with the Christian faith. While recognizing the just autonomy of created realities, as Vatican II does, there always remains for us the “tabernacle of our conscience”. This is an inviolable sanctuary and it cannot be subjugated to the law of men, which, by definition, cannot be absolute.

“We reject the false doctrine, as though the state, over and beyond its special commission, should and could become the single and totalitarian order of human life, thus fulfilling the church's vocation as well.” This declaration (known as the Barmen Declaration) dates to May 31, 1934. It was signed by two great theologians, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth.

VI. The prophetic dimension of religious life and the Kingdom

I was fortunate to attend the private audience that Pope Francis set aside for the superiors general on November 29, 2013. This exchange which lasted nearly three hours gave us an opportunity to meet a simple man, one who spoke informally, often with a touch of humor. He answered a lot of questions and straightforwardly. The meeting remained confidential. However there did appear a summary by Fr. Antonio Spadaro, S.J., of the *Civiltà cattolica*. I particularly liked the way in which the Pope spoke of the Kingdom and the role of consecrated men and women in its proclamation.

“What is the role of the consecrated life?” Here is what the Pope gave as an answer: “The prophetic nature of the Kingdom -- -- it is a non-negotiable. What is key is that one be a prophet and not play at it. To be sure, the devil presents us with temptations

and here is one: playing at being a prophet without really being one, simply taking on the appearance of doing so. But you can't play at these things. Personally, I have seen some regrettable things in this regard. No! Religious are men and women who light up the future."

In his interview with *Civiltà cattolica*, Pope Francis clearly affirmed that religious are called to a prophetic life. This is what sets them apart: "being prophets who bear witness to the way in which Jesus lived on this earth and who proclaim how the Kingdom of God will be in its perfection. A religious must never renounce the prophetic stance [...] Let us think of what so many great saints, monks, men and women religious since the abbot St. Anthony have done [...]. Being a prophet can sometimes mean making *ruido*⁴⁴; I am not quite sure how to say it...prophecy makes noise. You can say that it causes mayhem. Its charism is to be leaven in dough: prophecy proclaims the spirit of the Gospel..."

The Pope is inviting us to the "prophecy of the Kingdom". It is an explicit request that consecrated men and women be authentic witnesses: men and women who in the way of living show forth the reality of the Kingdom. And to do so, they unsettle, they disrupt, they bother, they make noise.

At the Assumption, do we still have prophets? Perhaps we should first of all ask the question of knowing whether the entire body of the Congregation is capable of bearing witness to the radicality of the Kingdom of God by means of its concrete life in the world. How is the way that we live out our vows of poverty, obedience and chastity capable of moving the 'good' conscience of our contemporaries that remains untroubled and often asleep?

Bruno Chenu called to mind the observation of Paul VI in *Euangelii nuntiandi* (#69) that religious are often at the outposts

⁴⁴ A Spanish word meaning "noise"

of the mission. He (Chenu) said of them “that they situate themselves at the frontier of the Church and the world, there where the verticality of the Kingdom of God can make the novelty of the Gospel appear. From the frontiers the call forth the center.”⁴⁵ Pope Francis speaks of the peripheries but he is speaking about the same thing. At the Assumption what are the peripheries, the frontiers that we have addressed? What outpost do I hold today that reveals the Kingdom? How is my community prophetic? How do we live out the spirit of the Beatitudes?

Religious vows have a twofold dimension: prophetic and eschatological. The vows of poverty, chastity and obedience proclaim our absolute trust in God. We are sure that helps us grow and provides what we need. But religious vows also bear witness in the world to inchoate future realities: they make the Kingdom present by giving the assurance of a renewed and transformed humanity. Are we aware that the vows we profess, with their highs and lows, are a sort of “emergence of the Kingdom”, as Bruno Chenu said?

VII. The Kingdom of God and the other world religions

For a long time the Church presented itself as the “new People of God”, forgetting that the Jewish people also had a special love relationship with God. For a long time, it was also difficult to think of other religions in terms of salvation. It was with the opening of the world that took place during the 19th and 20th centuries that things changed, presenting questions of a kind not seen before.

When it came to ecumenism, the discussion on the Kingdom of God was easier since there was for the various churches, despite

⁴⁵ Bruno CHENU, “L’urgence prophétique. Dieu au défi de l’histoire”. Bayard, 1997, p.269.

their great differences, unanimous recognition of the Lord Jesus Christ. But with the advent of interreligious dialogue, new questions arose. Let me quote Fr. Jacques Dupuis who was a notable theologian on the subject of world religions thanks to his Asian experience, especially in India. He clearly presents the challenge that we face.

“In the context of the theology of religions and of dialogue, the expression “Kingdom of God” of traditional theology also poses a problem. Is the Kingdom of God limited to Israel’s waiting and, in its historical fulfillment in the world, to Christianity and the Church? Are the “others” excluded? Or, to the contrary, are they full members of it, while remaining outside of the Church? Or do they “somehow” make up part of it in a way that might be characterized as implicit or invisible? In short, are Christianity and the Church identified with the Kingdom of God insofar as it is present in the world and in history? Or, to the contrary, is the Kingdom of God a universal reality that extends beyond the limits of the Christian Church? And, if this be the case, how are the Church and other world religions related to the Kingdom of God? And how are they related to it among themselves? And, further, what is to be said of the Kingdom of God in its eschatological fulfillment beyond history, insofar as its relationship to the Church and the “others”? Do Christians and the “others” belong equally to the fulfilled Kingdom of God?”⁴⁶.

There are plenty of questions, as you can see. But it is important for us Assumptionists who have recently entered the

⁴⁶ Jacques DUPUIS, “Vers une théologie chrétienne du pluralisme religieux”, *Cogitatio Fidei* n°200, Cerf, 1997, p.505.

Asian world and whose foundations on the African continent are many to address these questions with all clarity. As a result of our missionary involvement, we are capable of being apostles of interreligious dialogue and not remaining fixed on the answers provided by the “old Europe”. The wide open world where we are poses questions that have not been seen before, and just as we are invested in ecumenism, we must deepen our theology of religious pluralism. An Assumptionist, a man passionate for the Kingdom of God and a servant of the Church, cannot ignore the importance of these questions. It seems to me a priority that in the coming years the theological formation of our brothers be strengthened so that they are able to serve as apostles, workers of dialogue and bridge-builders. Walls will not prevent the Good News from being extended everywhere but we must make of ourselves zealous advocates for it.

VIII. Enabling the Kingdom to come to birth: the ‘ministry of engendering’

“Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Amen, amen, I say to you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.’ Nicodemus said to him, “How can a person once grown old be born again? Surely he cannot reenter his mother’s womb and be born again, can he?” Jesus answered, “Amen, amen, I say to you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit” (Jn 3:3-5).*

We need to be reborn from on high. These troubled times, when opposition to Christianity is rampant, also offer us a favorable moment to return to the purity of the Gospel. However, it must not be a question of refining our strategies in order to win back territory that we may have lost. Rather it is a question of making ourselves attentive to the Spirit who precedes us and of

living already here below the values of the Kingdom. We know well that it is the spirit of the Beatitudes that alone can transform the world, renew the universe.

This will only occur by personal conversion. Even though we may see ourselves as Christians, as religious, as men of goodwill, our hearts are still divided. We have not fully embraced the values of the Kingdom in our personal lives. I invite all of us to take up certain points in my letter on interiority once again and to continue to delve into the ways of an authentic Assumptionist spirituality, combining a love of God and a passion for our fellow man.

Once the Kingdom of God has begun to grow in us, then it is possible to work for its coming in the world.

For twenty years or so, theologians and pastors have been reflecting on a 'ministry of engendering'. In short, it is a matter of bringing real life to birth, by favoring all that is profoundly human, but also by proposing the faith. This ministry takes into account a spiritual renewal and a deep-rootedness in concrete reality "in space and time". This ministry requires nearness. "Life and 'faith' are not 'engendered' at a distance but within eyesight and earshot, in a specific place, at the entrance of a house, and through meaningful encounters. The Kingdom exists only by getting near to others."⁴⁷

In part, our pastoral effort consists in drawing close to humanity, in putting ourselves in relation with it and in entering into dialogue devoid of ulterior motives. The Kingdom of God grows whenever we make of ourselves neighbors of our brothers

⁴⁷ Christoph THEOBALD, "L'Évangile et l'Église", in Ph. BACQ, Ch. THEOBALD (dir.) "Passeurs d'Évangile", Novalis, 2008, p.39.

and sisters. The catecheses of Pope Francis on the post-COVID age hammered home this need of being attentive to the realities of the world in order to work that it become better.

IX. The Coming Kingdom or Christ Omega

Christ is the Alpha and the Omega; he is the one who is, who was, and who is to come. The Kingdom of God has already come but has not yet been completely fulfilled. The fullness of the Kingdom will take place at the end of time when humanity will have accepted to place itself under the Kingdom of Christ, that is to say, under the rule of perfect love. It is a Kingdom that everyone is called to welcome in his own personal and community life. But Jesus is also the one who is to come, the Omega, the one who comes from the end of time for the Parousia. The complete fulfillment of the Kingdom is the convergence of the history of men fully taken up with the Spirit of the living God and the return of Christ in glory. Man marks time such that the present precedes the future. The proclamation of the God who comes, borne by Jesus, reverses this relation. God comes from the future to invade the present. "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand."

It would be good for the Assumption to listen once again to the words that John Paul II wrote in *Vita consecrata* (#27):

"Come, Lord Jesus!" (*Rev 22:20*). This expectation is *anything but passive*: although directed towards the future Kingdom, it expresses itself in work and mission, that the Kingdom may become present here and now through the spirit of the Beatitudes, a spirit capable of giving rise in human society to effective aspirations for justice, peace, solidarity and forgiveness.

This is clearly shown by the history of the consecrated life, which has always borne abundant fruit even for this world. By their charisms, consecrated persons become signs of the Spirit pointing to a new future enlightened by faith and by Christian hope. *Eschatological expectation becomes mission*, so that the Kingdom may become ever more fully established here and now. The prayer "Come, Lord Jesus!" is accompanied by another: "Thy Kingdom come!" (Mt 6:10).

As Bruno Chenu wrote:

"I like to recall that one dimension of the mystery of Christ remains unknown to us. We can relate to the historical Christ but we do not know what the final face of Christ will look like. Christ is still the one who must come, the one who has not yet said his final word, the one who will not make himself fully present until the day of judgment (...) The Kingdom itself will be truly catholic because it will manifest what is, for the time being, quite veiled, the relationship of Christ and the Spirit, on the one hand, and the men of every religion and every ideology, on the other."⁴⁸

Our task is known: we are to await Christ, not passively but actively in the Spirit. By working in the spirit of the Beatitudes, we will be able to hasten the definitive coming of Christ. The Kingdom is a covenant between God and man in view of transforming the entire universe. When this fulfillment takes place, the face of Christ will be completely unveiled and revealed to us. We will see him as he is.

⁴⁸ Bruno CHENU, "L'Église au cœur", Bayard, 2019 (réédition), p.355.

CONCLUSION:

The Kingdom is the object of our desire. It is the heart of our Christian life because its identity is fully and completely found in Christ. The Kingdom is fullness of life in God, communion fully realized in a reconciled world.

The Assumption cannot live without this passion for the Kingdom of God, in us and around us. Our interiority, our commitment to the triumph of the spirit of the Beatitudes, our search for justice and peace, our solidarity with the poor, our work for the unity of the Church and for dialogue between religions and cultures, all of this contributes in one way or another to the proclamation of the Kingdom. Our religious vocation makes of us prophets of the Kingdom to come. We are watchmen and sentinels.

Come, Lord Jesus!

Rome, May 23, 2021
Solemnity of Pentecost

Very Rev. Benoît GRIÈRE, A.A.
Superior general

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