

## THE PASSION FOR UNITY



*Letter to the congregation  
on the occasion of the Sesquicentennial  
of the Near Eastern Mission*

The icon of St. Peter-St. Andrew conveys the meaning of the the spiritual center opened in Bucharest by the Assumptionists in 2011.The image of the two apostles represents the brotherly movement which draws them together in a beautiful gesture of communion and symbolizes the unity of East and West beyond their differences. This is what is seen so well in the icon "written" by Ioan Antonescu, an Orthodox artist from Alba Julia and his wife, based on the model of the one offered in 1964 by the Patriarch Athenagoras I to Pope Paul VI to commemorate their historic encounter in Jerusalem.

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Letter # 1 of the Superior General



## **INTRODUCTORY MESSAGE TO THE BROTHERS AND SISTERS OF THE NEAR EASTERN MISSION**

The letter "Passion for Unity" is addressed to sisters, brothers, and friends of the Assumption. Sr. Felicia and I wanted to write a joint message to convey the communion that exists between our two congregations with regard to the Near Eastern Mission. The Augustinians of the Assumption and the Oblates of the Assumption are closely united for the sake of the Kingdom in this mission.

"On the occasion of this sesquicentennial we are addressing ourselves to you, dear Assumptionist Brothers and Oblate Sisters, who are working together at the service of the Kingdom in the Near Eastern Mission.

Since our foundations were established in the Near East we have shared the same mission, the same commitments, and the same spirit: the passion for unity. Our fraternity and our collaboration bear witness to our family spirit and our solidarity with the local Churches of two rites and with the people of these countries.

It is a history marked by the faces of so many Assumptionists and Oblates who wrote with their lives of faith, courage, and fidelity the great Golden Book of the Near Eastern Mission. It continues to be written in our day thanks to all those who currently make up our communities in Bulgaria, Greece, Jerusalem, Romania, Russia, and Turkey.

Today and the day after we are called to forge a common vision for the Near Eastern Mission, to galvanize and channel our efforts so that we might manifest in a prophetic way that communion, in humility and charity, that takes us beyond our diversity and differences, is possible. We count on your willingness to continue this mission and on your creativity to be builders of bridges.

As sons and daughters of Fr. d'Alzon, we are responsible for our commitment to the cause of unity and the future of the Near Eastern Mission! It is up to us to become new founders, to be men and women of communion so as to live this adventure with open minds, boldness, and joy.”

Sister Felicia GHIORGHIES, O.A.

Fr. Benoît GRIÈRE, A.A.

Dear Brothers and dear Sisters,

This is my first letter as superior general. I undertake this delicate exercise knowing well that I have had illustrious predecessors who have marked the life of our congregation by their style and their ideas. Therefore it is with great humility that I venture to share with you some of my convictions so that you might have the courage to deepen your passion for the unity of the Church.

I address all Assumptionists, but I also wish to include our Oblate Sisters and our lay friends. Today, there is no doubt that we form a family and that the major apostolic challenges of the Assumption concern us all. By including the Oblate Sisters and the laity as well, I wish to show our communion in working for the coming of the Kingdom. We cannot act alone.





## WHY A LETTER ON THE NEAR EASTERN MISSION?

For an Assumptionist the Christian Near East is a passion. Celebrating the sesquicentennial would be reason enough to write a letter, but I think we have to look beyond the simple commemoration of some glorious past. I begin my generalate with a letter on the Near Eastern Mission to signify that the Assumptionist is a man of passion. Passion for the Near Eastern Mission is the sign of a passion that is much larger, much broader, that is, one for the unity of the Church and for the Kingdom. We are men of communion and our way of being, of living, of acting must be marked by the tireless search for reconciliation and unity. I am writing this letter in the middle of Holy Week. It is impossible for me to forget Christ's prayer in John's gospel: "That they may be one!"

In January 2007 Fr. Richard Lamoureux published a letter dedicated to the Near Eastern Mission<sup>1</sup>. I invite you to reread it because it expresses simply the major orientations which remain ours today. So, five years later, why write a new letter if, fundamentally, nothing has changed? In fact, there have been some changes and among them I would indicate the opening of the community in Bucharest. It was long-awaited and finally saw the light of day at the end of 2010. Elsewhere, our fragility has become clearer in

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<sup>1</sup> R. Lamoureux, "In one body" The Near Eastern Mission of the Assumption, 2007.

Athens where today there is but Fr. Alexander Psaltis to serve the parish and respond to the great many requests that come his way. The community of Kadiköy has welcomed a Congolese religious, Fr. Jules Nguru, but we still need to find dynamic reinforcements to support our elderly. Finally, the community of Saint-Peter-in-Gallicantu has experienced important changes both for us and for the Oblates.

To write on the Near Eastern Mission is to show its privileged place still at the heart of the Congregation. A passion for the Near East must be cultivated. The Assumption would not be faithful to its origins if it were to abandon this piece of its history.

The passion that animated Fr. Emmanuel d'Alzon must once again become our passion. We have just concluded the bicentennial of the birth of our venerable founder; there is no greater tribute to pay him than to remain faithful to the commitment that was his day in and day out: the cause of unity. To commit oneself today to the Near Eastern Mission is to continue, in a particular way, the action undertaken by Emmanuel d'Alzon in the light of Vatican II.

I also write this letter with a deeply held conviction: the Assumption has not said its last word for the cause of unity. Even though our strengths are modest and our weaknesses obvious, we still have a role to play. The Near Eastern Mission is the privileged ground where we can demonstrate our passion for the Kingdom. With all my heart I believe that we still have our place in the Near East

and that we can work for the cause of ecumenism and the reconciliation of the Churches. The Assumption, more than 160 years after her birth, remains a living apostolic body capable of fulfilling her mission. The reconciliation of the Churches is a centerpiece of its agenda.

### **THE NEAR EASTERN MISSION IS A PRIORITY.**

Since the chapter of 2005, we have included the Near Eastern Mission in the list of the congregation's priorities. Why? In order to mobilize the whole body to support our apostolic commitment in the Near East. There have been other priorities; I think especially of the foundations in Asia and of our presence in the world of the young. A problem then arises: in the face of these priorities how are we to choose? I think that the chapter members were right not to impose one priority alone but to allow for the possibility of a choice, all the while insisting on the necessary link between each of these actions. There must not be a contradiction between a commitment to the unity of the church in the Near East and one for the foundations in Asia. Every Assumptionist is called to live in deep communion with the various apostolic actions of the congregation. Better still, wherever we bear witness to the Kingdom, we must manifest, in our own way, the passion for unity that gives us life.

## **FRAGILITY THAT IS EVIDENT**

When we look at the eight communities of the Augustinians of the Assumption in the Near East we are immediately struck by their fragility. These communities, often only one in a country, as is the case for Jerusalem, Moscow, Athens, Plovdiv, and Istanbul, are composed of a small core of brothers. Without the proximity of the Oblate Sisters the fragility would be even more dire. Fragility also resides in the fact that they are so remote. The brothers who live in these houses are hours away from the nearest community. Lastly, the economic question is also a worry. Our solidarity allows us to support numerous communities that are not financially self-sufficient.

I thank the Province of France for its effort to oversee this area. The appointment of a provincial delegate has allowed us to move on to a new stage in the animation of the communities. The Mission's regular meetings and retreats are means to compensate for the isolation and to encourage exchange. Our Mission there is fragile and, without God's help, we can state without reserve that it would have already died a long time ago. In spite of this fragility, the number of communities has not decreased. However, this does not mask our poverty. In the last fifteen years, we witnessed the closing of the community of Ankara but we also had the joy of inaugurating that of Bucharest. Yet let us be realistic, for the current fragility that we are experiencing will oblige us to take radical decisions in the near future. Is it possible to keep only one brother in Athens? How long will we be able to keep Blaj and

Kadiköy? Our Oblate Sisters are confronted with the same difficulties as we are and we must also have the concern to mutually support one another.

This picture is marked by precariousness. Often all rests on one or two brothers capable of carrying out the apostolic activity. But let us not forget to say what the apostle Paul did: "my power is made perfect in weakness" II Cor 12:9.

## **A MEANINGFUL PRESENCE**

In spite of a fragility which is clearly evident, we must remember that our presence remains meaningful, nevertheless. We have not fallen into meaninglessness and we still have interesting apostolic resources. I cannot enumerate everything that makes up the wealth of our presence today in the midst of a precarious context, but the departure of the Assumption from certain of these sites would, without a doubt, create a real void.

I believe that our presence in Russia, in Greece, in Turkey, in Israel, in Bulgaria and in Romania bears positive witness to the commitment of the congregation in the cause of unity. The ties we have created with the local population allow us to say that we are players and render service to the church. Our collaboration with the Oblates characterizes us as a fraternity that unites men and women in the same objective.

Albeit modest, the place of Assumption is important for the life of the Church. We are often the last witnesses of a gratuitous presence to a small group of believers. The Byzantine Catholic Church of Bulgaria is composed of little more than 10,000 faithful, whereas the parishioners in Kadiköy are a few dozen; but this modest reality should lead us not to desert them. Who is there today that could replace us? Our vocation is not to have prestigious works alone.

## **A MISSION TO DEFINE**

We have heard it time and again: we are heirs but we must be founders. Our apostolic works will remain relevant to the extent we re-examine them regularly. Apostolic religious life has this function: to be a sentinel in changing times. We are watchmen and we should re-evaluate our actions periodically so as to avoid sclerosis and fatigue.

The Near Eastern Mission will remain a living mission insofar as we change and evolve. Let us not succumb to the nostalgia of bygone times, but open up the horizons.

Today, there does not exist an overall vision for the Near Eastern Mission. We have a presence that has been pared down and we don't have a clearly defined common project. That is a real problem when we try to call for reinforcements to support our institutions there. It is only when we have begun to define an overall vision that we will be able to offer a common mission for the Assumption in the Near East. This work of defining the mission began

several years ago and is ongoing. The regular meetings of the religious in this Mission have contributed in a special way to this effort. By sharing impressions of the various missions and reflecting together on our activity, we are then able to identify the major characteristics of a common mission. Of course, our communities are quite different. There are some with two different rites. There are 6 national languages. Vocations have all but disappeared in some countries, even though that does not mean they are not possible. This contrasting panorama makes it difficult to identify a common denominator, but the latter does exist, in particular around the questions of unity and ecumenism. From now on it will behoove us to implement this common vision with a more concerted effort and more regular exchanges.

Coming to an awareness of the unity of the Near Eastern Mission resulted from the reflection on re-founding a community in Bucharest. The preparatory meetings helped us to understand that we all had something at stake in the successful realization of this foundation sixty years after our forced departure.

How we animate the Near Eastern Mission is important in our effort to arrive at this common awareness. There is clearly a passion for the Near East at the Assumption and it needs to be cultivated, a passion that will develop as we re-discover our past and renew our interest in the Near Eastern churches today. We cannot remain strangers to the culture of the countries that welcome us and there is a serious effort at inculturation that must take place. But there also exists the need to understand the overall picture of

the Near Eastern Mission. Too often, one is ignorant of the reality of countries other than that of the one where one lives. We need to facilitate exchanges and visits so that we can discover one another. I want to encourage the initiatives of those young Assumptionists who have organized activities during summer vacation that include going to meet the brothers of the Near Eastern Mission. It is a good experience!

### **A VISION TO PROPOSE**

We need a vision that is broad and generous. We are well aware that our weakness doesn't afford us the opportunity to support a multitude of projects, but we must have a powerful ambition. We will not accomplish everything, but we want to show our zeal for unity by working primarily in the Orthodox world. We need to form religious in Eastern theology. We need to get back to specialized studies. One may not necessarily have to become a high ranking Byzantine specialist, but it would be interesting to have competent people in Eastern theology, spirituality, ecclesiology and liturgy. Moreover, it is desirable that we have a love for the Fathers of the Church. Let us develop a fascination for the writings of John-Chrysostom, Basil, Gregory Palamas and Theodore the Studite. Deeply-rooted in our Augustinian tradition, we will be able to encourage exchanges between the two lungs of the Church. Let us also learn to appreciate Eastern iconography. Let us discover the wealth of icons and the sense of prayer they convey. Fr.



Donat Lamothe is a brother who has shown us the way of this artistic passion.

## **MEN TO CALL**

The responsibility of the Near Eastern Mission, oversight of the religious, and apostolic priorities are under the responsibility of the provincial of France. The last provincial chapter reaffirmed with a certain amount of force the importance of the Near Eastern Mission in the life of the province<sup>2</sup>. In the near future, with the reorganization of provinces, the responsibility of presiding over the destiny of the Near Eastern Mission will fall into the hands of the provincial of Europe. From now on the superior general has the responsibility of assigning young religious their first apostolic mission. This prerogative will be implemented in a spirit of "close deliberation with the provincial and the candidate in question". I would find it interesting that we begin fostering vocations for this mission and that we begin to see such vocations surfacing naturally with one or another young religious. But we will always have to exert time and energy in preparing candidates for an assignment to the Near Eastern Mission. It is also possible that in the course of my mandate I shall specifically request that this or that brother be assigned there. Being so called is part of religious life and I believe that one's willingness

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Official Acts of the Provincial Chapter, Province of France, 2011, § 153-169.

to answer a particular call leads to spiritual growth and freedom.

***The Near Eastern Mission needs the Assumption; the Assumption needs the Near Eastern Mission.***

I invite every Assumptionist to stand in conscience before this call to support the Near Eastern Mission. Are we so fearful that we cannot imagine joining those who are living this mission day in and day out? Have we lost the flame that so energetically filled the hearts of the first Assumptionists?

What kind of religious do we need in the Near Eastern Mission? The answer to this question can be found in part by coming to know those who made up the Near Eastern Mission. There are, first of all, the portraits of those elders who continue to inspire us. I think especially of Victorin Galabert who was the founder of the mission and who is a figure too little known at Assumption. There are men who resisted the Romanian Communist régime such as, among others, Stefan Berinde and Bernard Stef. There are those great figures within the Soviet world: Bishop Pie Neveu, Fr. Judicaël Nicolas, the many American chaplains who served the embassy of the United States. There are our martyrs Kamen, Pavel and Josaphat and our Bulgarian bishops, Methodius Stratiev and Samuel Djoundrine who had to exercise their ministry in the most fragile of conditions. And then there are all those who worked in discretion to develop the congregation and its apostolate, men like Adhémar Merckx or again Austin Treamer, for example, in

Romania. Each of them whether Belgian, French, English, Romanian or Bulgarian brought his stone for the construction of the mission. Let us not forget those that allowed the congregation to begin anew after the oppressive years of Communism. I think of the brothers who were sent to Margineni, Frs. Hervé Stéphan, Maurice Laurent, Cornie Nelissen, and Celeste Pianezze. Other brothers went to Plovdiv: Frs. Petar Lubjas, Daniel Gillier and Claudio Molteni, not to mention François Bernard, too quickly taken from us. Finally, the resurgence of our presence at Saint Louis of the French in Moscow - thanks to Fr. Bernard Le Léanec and with the reinforcement of Fr. Adrien Masson - who complemented the Assumptionist presence that Fr. Norman Meiklejohn provided at the American embassy. Today, we need new founders----men and women religious, lay persons who will accept Assumption's Near Eastern adventure, individuals who are willing to build something new without forgetting the past.

If one had to draw a portrait of the Assumptionist of the Near East, I would say that he is a man who loves the Church, who is capable of dialogue, respectful of differences, deeply-rooted in prayer, ready to live a certain solitude, but concerned with keeping ties with the whole congregation. A man open to cultural difference and who celebrates the liturgy with joy and conviction.

We have in Romania, in Bulgaria, in Russia, in Greece brothers who are natives of these countries. They are integrated in the culture of their nation and they allow us in turn to insert ourselves in depth as well. Inculturation is necessary because the Assumption must be fully involved

in local realities. We need a Russian Assumption, a Romanian Assumption, a Bulgarian Assumption... Wherever possible, we have to foster local vocations. I thank the young brothers who currently work in Romania and in Russia and contribute to this inculturation. Religious from elsewhere must learn the local language and come to love the culture of the country where he lives. But we will also aim to create international communities because it is important not to lock oneself in one cultural model alone and it is important to become part of that massive global movement that is leading to a mixing of populations throughout the world. The gospel is a powerful force calling us to open and renew ourselves. It is also a challenge to the current models that surround us. International communities have this ambition to show that understanding and communion are possible in the diversity of languages and cultures.

Religious natives of the countries of the Near Eastern Mission have learned to live this diversity by virtue of the studies and pastoral experiences they completed away from their homelands. They returned home enriched by this exposure. We must continue to encourage exchanges between East and West.

## **A LOOK TOWARD THE FUTURE**

We are not nostalgic persons, but apostles looking forward. Our love of the gospel pushes us to always advance and to undertake actions for the announcement of Kingdom. Even though marked by fragility, the Near Eastern

Mission can and must produce something new. Our capacity for innovation is limited, but we can go further in what we propose.

I would like in the lines that follow to offer some thoughts for the reflection of each one and more particularly for the brothers and sisters that work in our eastern establishments. These are modest proposals: a common proposal for the whole Mission and other proposals for the various communities.

***A common project:***

The ***Saint Peter and Saint Andrew Center in Bucharest*** is a recent development. This Center has high ambitions. It represents the object of hope not only for the Near Eastern Mission but for the whole congregation as well. It has been recognized as a mobilizing work and warrants a high level of dedication from us. In my opinion, it is the unifying project which we need in order to help us forge a common vision for the Mission.

The original project called for us to contribute to the ecumenical dialogue. To this end it includes a center for meetings and cultural exchange. But there is also a residence for students who are broadly welcomed, without distinction of confession. Finally, the library has been designed so as to encourage specialized research in the areas of patrology and Byzantine studies.

The Assumptionist community opened its doors more than a year ago and is already finding its way in the Romanian capital. The programs being offered are numerous,

varied and of quality and a public is being built up. The residence for students is running well and the young people have shown an interest in our life.

Nevertheless, we must still go further and this new step cannot be taken unless the whole body of the Assumption is vigorously committed to it.

The Saint Peter and Saint Andrew Center should become a beacon not only for the country itself and for the Near Eastern Mission alone, but more so for the whole congregation. I dream of this house becoming a place of gathering and formation for religious, men and women, and for the laity of the Assumption who want to do more in the cause of unity. The Center could become the privileged site for formation sessions on any number of themes which could entail stays of varying lengths of time. A newsletter could be published that would facilitate the spread of knowledge about Near Eastern Christianity. Young religious could come here for part of their formation and even follow courses of study. In order that it might respond adequately to the expectations which the Congregation has for it, the Bucharest community has requested that we foresee the formation of religious, men and women, as well as laity capable of carrying out programs. To do so, we must have a daring policy of formation. Let us not fear to direct brothers to specialize in ecumenical and/or Byzantine studies.

### ***A community mission:***

If defining an overall mission for all the communities is desirable, it is equally necessary that each community make an effort to express its own apostolic project clearly. There are already constituent elements of a mission, but too often brothers who are called to work in the Near Eastern Mission have the impression of not knowing what they will be doing. A well identified mission is indispensable. I will take a look at each existing community in order to encourage it to make further progress in this work of clarification.

#### **• *Romania***

Romania is the only country where the Assumption has more than one established community and where we are present in two rites. The communities have made efforts to visit one another, but the exchanges remain limited. It would be advisable that the communities develop closer relations and engage in some common activities. The "Saint Peter and Saint Andrew Center" is undoubtedly the place where each of them must be involved in order to foster a common spirit.

One priority is the need to give new impetus to vocation ministry. Romania, even though the majority of the population is Orthodox, includes a non-negligible Latin and Eastern rite Catholic minority. We have been fortunate to receive Romanian vocations; but, for some time now, the numbers have been diminishing. I am convinced that a solid vocation ministry program is possible. It will require

men who are fully committed and deeply grounded in their religious vocation. I hope that we can support you in this effort.

Our Oblate Sisters are well established in Romania and we work together on behalf of orphans and for the Bucharest library. I think that we can strengthen our collaboration for the well-being of the Mission. Vocation ministry could be one of the areas to explore.

- *Greece*

Once upon a time the Assumption in Greece flourished. One antenna was the French Institute of Byzantine Studies which existed for many years. Fr. Christopher Julian Walter was the last Assumptionist to dedicate himself to the library and to the work of Byzantine iconography where his reputation was extensive. Progressively the community dwindled, at times as the result of the premature death of religious. Now Fr. Alexander Psaltis is alone to face the numerous tasks of parish ministry and to reach out to the poorest. I would like to thank brothers who have accepted to support Alexander by spending some time in Athens. That has been a comfort for him; he still considers himself be unequivocally Assumptionist. We know that the present situation cannot continue. What are we to do? As I write this letter, two Filipino brothers are lending a hand at Saint Theresa's Parish in Athens. Their principal activity will be to dedicate themselves to the significant Filipino community of the city. I encourage this kind of initiative, that not only shows our proximity with an isolated brother, but



that permits the Assumption to still commit itself apostolically to populations on the move. There is also a large population which comes from English-speaking Africa who would need a pastor. I think other initiatives are likewise possible. Athens was the place where Fr. Augustine Rousos had initiated an ecumenical spiritual fraternity where Catholic and Orthodox met to pray together. Might we take this idea and apply it in other countries with an Orthodox tradition where we are established?

- *Turkey*

At the beginning of the XXth century, we were very numerous in Turkey. Little by little, with the departure of Christians, the number of Assumptionist communities dwindled. In 2000 we handed over our house in Ankara to the Jesuits and we withdrew to Kadiköy. Today, three religious, two aged Frenchmen and a Congolese, Jules Nguru, serve there in close collaboration with the Oblate Sisters. This is really the barest minimum in terms of what is viable. However, the Assumption needs to maintain a witness in the Moslem world. We have begun to see an opening to this Moslem reality in West Africa, but must we abandon Turkey?

Among our religious, Fr. Xavier Jacob is a keen student of Turkish culture and Fr. Yves Plunian dedicates himself to patrology. Let us take advantage of their presence to initiate others into this fascinating world. Our little community is entrusted with the only Catholic parish on the Asian bank of Istanbul. We bear responsibility for this

small Catholic community, but we must aim higher, be more ambitious. The Apostolic Vicar of Istanbul, Most Rev. Louis Armel Pelâtre, awaits reinforcements for the various diocesan missions. We need to show evidence of resourcefulness. Why not undertake a pastoral animation project with the collaboration of Assumptionist laity? The presence of laity could allow us to launch new initiatives. We have a spacious house that could allow for extensive activity, once certain indispensable renovations are completed. I would gladly entrust the future of our presence there to a task force assigned to reflect broadly on it.

We enjoy close relations with the Syrian Orthodox community that shares our church. Peaceful dialogue is possible with them. I ask myself: which brother of ours would be ready to study in detail their theological tradition?

Let us not forget that we have two brothers of Turkish origin at Assumption, a professed religious and a postulant. Albeit very rare, vocations are not impossible.

### • *Bulgaria*

Bulgaria is the land of our three martyrs: Kamen, Pavel and Josaphat. We maintained an important presence there up until the dawn of Communism. Today, our apostolic activity is modest and our brothers are completely devoted to the service of the Byzantine rite Catholic community. Whether in Plovdiv, in Kouklen or in Pokrovan we serve Oriental rite parishes. Our presence is much appreciated in the Eparchy. Our brothers coming from France, Croatia and

Italy have succeeded in learning well the Bulgarian language and have adapted to the local culture. They also render many services to communities of sisters. The collaboration with the Oblates is a major asset.

Even though we are at the service of the Byzantine rite Church, we are convinced that today “uniatism” is no longer the answer to the question of the separation of the Churches and we subscribe to the Balamand agreements.<sup>3</sup> But our presence in this Church - in Bulgaria and in Romania – is a reminder of the importance of apostolic religious life. The Assumption is also happy to have brothers of this rite in her ranks.

The community of Plovdiv also welcomes young high school students with the hope that a vocational seed will be planted and grow. Several young men from Bulgaria have shown some interest, but none has persevered. However, two young Assumptionists from other countries have been called to the Assumption while living in Bulgaria. We can thank our brothers there for that happy result. Our efforts for vocations must continue. Our brothers are deeply committed to parish and youth ministry, but additional support would be needed if we are to expand our pastoral activities.

The Assumption in Bulgaria also oversees the website of the Near Eastern Mission. Created in 2005, it responds

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<sup>3</sup> In the current search for full communion, this declaration of June 23 1993 on “The Uniate Question” (in the past the method preferred for the union of the churches was uniatism) affirms that “unionism cannot be a model for unity”.

to a wish expressed at the general chapter of 2005 "to foster in-depth knowledge of the Eastern Churches and traditions, especially the Orthodox, and to give information on the life of the communities in the East." I thank and encourage Fr. Claudio for his dedication to this work. I am proposing that every community identify a brother as a correspondent for this site so that it might receive regular updates. It is a modest work but one meant to stir up our passion for the Orient.

### • *Jerusalem*

It is the holy city par excellence. Memories of the Lord abound there. This city should light a fire within us. It plays a powerful symbolic role in the life of believers and the world. The Assumption is called to advance the challenge of Unity and Peace there. The community of Jerusalem has enormous advantages. We have a shrine that has been completely renovated thanks to the efforts of Fr. Robert Fortin and we have a pleasant house with spacious outbuildings. The community of the Oblate Sisters is fully integrated into the supervision of the site. We do welcome pilgrims, but don't we need to renew this mission and refocus the nature of the welcome we give? Why not encourage welcoming groups of pilgrims and accompanying them on their visit? Why not take even greater advantage of the hostel built to welcome groups of young pilgrims? Organizing various types of sessions could be a course of action as well.

Furthermore, it is to be hoped that our community be open to receiving brothers in continuing formation or to Assumptionist students. For a long time Jerusalem was an Assumptionist scholasticate. Why not make Jerusalem a spoke in the formation wheel in tandem with with Kadiköy and Bucharest? Why not consider collaborating with Assumption College in Worcester, as we are doing in Rome?

It is also desirable to encourage regular contact with the Patriarchate and to collaborate with it on various matters. The Patriarch would be happy to see us involved in the local Church. Finally, the site of Saint-Peter-in-Gallicantu should encourage us to create liturgical experiences befitting this shrine. I encourage the initiative that has already been taken to celebrate the Holy Week Triduum with other religious communities of the city. A liturgy centered on penance and reconciliation could be offered to certain groups of pilgrims.

- ***Moscow***

Moscow continues to be called the third Rome by the Russian Orthodox. This name confirms, if it were needed, the importance for the Assumption of a presence in the Russian capital. The ecclesial context is delicate because relations with the Orthodox world, - at the institutional level - , are difficult. But daily contact and sharing with the local population are possible and to be further encouraged. We need not fear to create relationships with the Orthodox world and to foster exchanges with it. A spiritual ecumenism is always possible.

Serving the international community is important and we need to continue doing it. Still, it is also good to take root in the Russian world. This is not contradictory. Catholicity entails an openness to all. It illustrates that there is more to the world than just the reality of nations and that the world is a whole that longs for a fellowship beyond the differences of language and culture. It seems important to lend a hand to the various linguistic communities and among them the Vietnamese community. The Assumption was the first to show a concern for the welfare of the Vietnamese of Moscow. It would be good to have a Vietnamese Assumptionist brother to care for these expatriates. An African religious would also be welcome. An international community in Moscow would be a relevant fraternal sign in the Russian world. The collaboration that takes place with our Oblate Sisters gives powerful witness to a fraternity that is respectful of differences.

This quick tour of our communities is not meant to replace the work of reflection that each one of them must undertake, but to encourage them to go even further. I count on each of them, together with the provincial's delegate, to make more progress in the definition of its mission, all the while taking into account the rapid evolution of the world and of our congregation.

It is not for me to indicate the mission to the delegate of the provincial of France, but it might be useful that I recall his unifying role. He is a man called to promote the unity of the mission and to foster adherence to a whole, broader and more meaningful than simple local priorities. He en-

courages religious, organizes meetings and creates opportunities for exchanges.

Fr. Michel Kubler carries out his role with a lot of zeal and devotion. We need to support his work and encourage his pastoral initiatives. The yearly meetings and retreats which occur are certainly good opportunities to favor mutual knowledge and unity. It is important for the brothers and sisters of the Near Eastern Mission to come to know each other and to work together.

I suggest that these meetings be an opportunity to exchange on what exists but also be a time to reflect on the construction of a **common vision** for the mission. We are at times too disjointed and have difficulty defining what constitutes the Near Eastern Mission. Our work must not become a hodgepodge of contrasting activities; it must become a joint project. By this I mean that it is necessary to mobilize energies in a common ambition. I think that our love for the Church and our passion for unity should lead us to easily find relevant actions to concretize our ambition.

The delegate of the provincial of France for the Near Eastern Mission affords every community a regular opportunity to reread its project and to integrate it into the overall project of the Near Eastern Mission.

### ***The Near Eastern Mission and the Province of Europe***

At a time when Europe is getting ready to consolidate into only one province, the question arises of the status of the Near Eastern Mission. It is important to respect its

distinctiveness while attending to its harmonious inclusion in the European reality. It would be a mistake to insist too much on the distinctiveness and forget the importance of constituting a European unity as the countries where we are located advance in this direction.

The Near Eastern Mission must be able to show its distinctiveness to Europe while being itself open to the outside. We thus need to thank the brothers who come from the countries of the Mission and who today are present elsewhere than in their country of origin. I think especially of the Romanian brothers whose mission is France, of Fr. Iosif Gal who is in Togo for the foundation of Sokode, and of Fr. Edward Shatov who is in Quebec. Even though we do not have many vocations, it is good to show that we belong to a universal body and that the missionary adventure continues.

### ***Lay Assumptionists***

I wrote previously that there is a place for the laity in the Near Eastern Mission.

Volunteers, full-time and part-time, are welcome; they enrich us by their presence. For several years now, the community of Saint Peter-in-Gallicantu has welcomed lay volunteers to help out in the ministry of the shrine. The experience has been positive and is gradually becoming part of the life of the community. Other communities of the Near Eastern Mission might do well to ask themselves how such an experience might work in their settings. The community of Margineni has some experience with it in their



work with the orphan children of Magura, but we would need to be much more ambitious and seek to create new positions wherever possible. The arrival of young volunteers has helped the community of Plovdiv contribute to the blossoming of Assumptionist vocations.

There is another aspect of the laity that, unfortunately, is not sufficiently developed in the Near Eastern Mission: that of lay-people who wish to share our spirituality and charism more closely. There are exceptions of course - I think of this or that person who is very connected to our congregation; but there still has not been enough effort to launch a responsible and organized lay association, native to countries where we are established. Why? I don't have an answer to this, but it would be regrettable that wherever we are present, we did not have a concern to promote the emergence of lay associates. I would like us to have Russians, Bulgarians, Greeks, Romanians and others still, active at the Assumption. We must not be afraid to propose our charism and thus to create partnerships that can bear fruit.

We have to make our charism known and propose the Assumptionist way as a path of holiness open to all. We are too apprehensive and we are afraid to propose our spiritual riches and our apostolic activity. Fr. d'Alzon had high ambitions for the laity and we must make every effort to follow in his footsteps.

I propose that every community examine how it can connect with lay persons and offer them a way of life that is clearly Assumptionist.

## **COLLABORATION WITH OUR OBLATE SISTERS**

The history of the missionary Oblates of the Assumption is intrinsically bound to that of the Near Eastern Mission. Founded to work side by side with Assumptionist religious, the Oblates learned very quickly how to bring their distinctiveness and sensitivity to the mission. The feminine touch was important in order to reach and be effective in those spheres where men were less welcomed. From the beginning our mission had a masculine and a feminine face and that is a profound grace. Today, this collaboration is successful and harmonious. We enjoy a common spirit and we desire to witness together to the Kingdom. Respect for our differences must be safeguarded and we must remain sensitive to the other who is our partner. As I have written, universal fraternity is expressed not only by internationality, but also by the close collaboration of men and women. Without the Oblates, it would be like a part of us had been amputated. Today, the poverty of our two communities is evident, but I am confident that together we surely have the spiritual resources to put in common for the cause of Unity.

## **ECUMENISM AT ASSUMPTION**

The passion for unity was deeply rooted in Emmanuel d'Alzon. His great idea was to put an end to the "Photian Schism" and, to that end, he sent missionaries to the Christian East. D'Alzon saw the need for a renewal of the East-

ern tradition which he considered to be weakened spiritually and ecclesiastically. His disciples progressively discovered the treasures of the Oriental Churches and became experts of its rich tradition. Let us preserve the love for unity that motivated Emmanuel d'Alzon and that must again inspire us.

It is no longer a question "of putting an end to the schism" in the spirit of the XIXth century; rather it is clearly one of undertaking a work of reconciliation while practicing an ecclesiology of communion. We are convinced that "dialogue is a path to the Kingdom"<sup>4</sup>, as Pope John-Paul II used to say. In order to promote this dialogue, it is necessary to come to know the various Christian confessions and religious traditions. We must come to know Orthodoxy because one comes to love that which one knows. We are probably in a *kairos*, a favorable moment, to contribute to this coming together with the firm desire of Benedict XVI and the good dispositions of the present generation of major patriarchs. The prospect of a pan-Orthodox council is also a positive factor in the renewal of the dialogue. Bolstered by clear and forceful Chapter decisions, the Assumption can play its role in all humility. We must give top priority to the Orthodox Church. Let us not be naïve; we know that our role will be very delicate, but we have the capacity of witnessing to our love for the Oriental tradition and to our fidelity to the Church of Rome, that all might breathe with both lungs of the Church. I encourage each of the brothers and sisters of the Near Eastern Mis-

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<sup>4</sup> John-Paul II, "Redemptoris missio" n° 57

sion to forge fraternal ties with the Orthodox and move forward in the discovery of their tradition. Let us not throw up our hands; let us always be beings of dialogue and exchange. Why not form spiritual fraternities by creating prayer groups? Why not pursue the experience of our brothers of Plovdiv who organize pilgrimages bringing together Catholics and Orthodox? I am sure that other initiatives can be found.

Assumption must mobilize itself for the cause of unity. The Orthodox Churches are those with whom we have the greatest theological proximity. Let us not fear to approach them.

The Assumptionist of 2012 must enter into the familiar company of the Oriental tradition. Today the means of social communication have never been so widespread and accessible; let us use them to enrich ourselves. To understand better the Oriental tradition and the churches it comprises must be the motto of the entire congregation.

### ***And the other Churches?***

Orthodoxy remains the clearly identified priority because it is in the countries of the Orthodox tradition that we are more clearly invested, but the majority of the Congregation is confronted on a daily basis by the Churches descended from Protestantism. Daily Europe, Africa, North and South America meet Protestants belonging to multiple denominations: from the Reformed to the Lutheran and even to the evangelical Baptist and Pentecostal Churches. To pursue our desire for unity, it is advisable that we also

have knowledge of these ecclesial realities that are often dynamic. Dialogue is not always easy with the new churches, but with humility and patience approach is possible. I would like young Assumptionists to invest in the study of Protestant theology. We can continue the work of a George Tavard by becoming interested in Anglicanism, in the Episcopalian or Methodist Churches. We can follow the example of a Daniel Olivier by studying Luther. Still other fields of study are possible.....

We cannot lose interest in the other churches; ignorance would render us guilty and would lead us to forget our own history. I encourage young religious to consider a deep appreciation of the theology of the Protestant traditions. It would not be time lost. Dialogue with Protestantism would also have the advantage of preparing those who will commit themselves to the dialogue with Orthodoxy.

### ***Interreligious dialogue***

This also is to be maintained wherever possible. Turkey and Israel are countries where the majority of the inhabitants belong either to Islam or to Judaism. An Assumptionist must be capable of initiating a dialogue at the level of daily living, one that is not situated at the theological level but in the ordinary relationships with people.

More and more, our globalized world exposes us to other religions and what we have experienced in the Near Eastern Mission should lead us to be prepared to live like Christians in a world characterized by religious diversity.

More and more, Islam is becoming a massive presence in Europe and in Africa. We are ill-prepared for this dialogue because the Assumption has lost its foundations in North Africa and we are hardly present in countries of Moslem tradition. Nevertheless, we can commit ourselves to Islamic studies. I have asked the Province of Africa to train brothers in this domain. Other provinces could contribute to this effort as well.

The Judaism that we meet in Israel is not known well at all. It would be good to expand our knowledge of this religion to which Christians owe so much.

Lastly, our arrival in Asia puts us in relationship with Buddhist currents. In Vietnam and in Korea we must take care to develop good relationships with the followers of this religious tradition. To gain knowledge we must also study.

The Near Eastern Mission is a reality with any number of contrasts. It reminds us that we face fragility everywhere and that it is up to us to reveal our love for the Church in the midst of the current hardships. We don't need heroes to work in this Mission, but we do need men of conviction and of faith.

Too often today we hold a negative view of the success of ecumenism. We think, sometimes justly so, that dialogue is spinning its wheels and that we are no longer making progress. It is true that the years immediately following Vatican II were rich in this progress and that today we are in a phase where it is much less spectacular. Nevertheless I sincerely believe that there is work to be done and that the

Assumption must contribute as best it can. It is in recovering the courage to act that we will break the spiral of pessimism. We are not condemned to inaction. I said earlier that we should learn to grow close to the various Churches that are near to us; let us develop an interest in theological dialogue by reading good works like those of the Groupe des Dombes for the French-speaking<sup>5</sup> or by consulting well-known English-speaking web sites<sup>6</sup>; let us take up anew the idea of a spiritual ecumenism by participating in prayer groups for unity. I want to give a special word of encouragement to our university in Worcester that has recently given new life to the *Ecumenical Institute*, a structure that encourages dialogue between Catholics and Protestants.

Resignation is the worst of messages that we can give our contemporaries.

In recent years we haven't ceased saying or writing that "the Assumptionist is a man of communion". It is our ecclesial responsibility to advance the cause of unity. Our community life, in the first place, must embody this thirst for unity and respect for the other. Our apostolates must reflect the love of dialogue and exchange. The straightforward and loyal collaboration with our Oblate Sisters is also

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<sup>5</sup> Especially its latest publication : "You, please pray like this", the Our Father, itinerary for the conversion of the Churches; Bayard, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> The site of the North American Academy of Ecumenists ([www.naae.net](http://www.naae.net)) or that of the Washington Theological Consortium ([www.washtheocon.org](http://www.washtheocon.org)).

a sign of communion. Our spirituality must be marked by the call of the Acts of the Apostles and by Saint Augustine to be "of one heart and one soul intent on God".

## WHAT FUTURE FOR THE MISSION?

Without hesitation I quote Fr. Jean-Paul Perier-Muzet who summarizes the substance of my thought on this topic "The future surely belongs to God. But to form religious men and women at the Assumption who are men and women of faith and communion in these countries is part of its founding charism, which must be given new life and new direction in every age. The strength of this mission persists in the joyful and paschal call of an international solidarity that pierces the walls of divisions and barriers, at the service of this unique cause that we like to call at Assumption "a great cause of God and of man." More than a course to maintain or some nostalgic past to revive, it is a life-giving challenge to be pursued so that we may continue to see "far and wide," as Fr. d'Alzon undoubtedly did, but particularly in the concrete, time-tested manner of a Fr. Galabert, *a stone lost in the foundation*, in his own style, but ultimately patterned on the *apostolic route followed by the Apostles*."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> J.P.Perier-Muzet, "History of the Near Eastern Mission"; available on the net:  
[www.assomption.org/Presentations/MissionOrient/HistoriqueMissionOrient/HistoriqueMissionOrient-Sommaire.htm](http://www.assomption.org/Presentations/MissionOrient/HistoriqueMissionOrient/HistoriqueMissionOrient-Sommaire.htm)



We must remain faithful to the founding charism, but we must also give evidence of imagination and innovation. We must train men and women conscious of their responsibility for the cause of unity. Our Near Eastern Mission will remain alive as long as we have these brothers and sisters available. Let us all commit ourselves in our own way.

Fr. Benoît Grière  
Superior general

May 17, 2012  
on the feast of the Ascension

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