

Examining the Reign: actively contemplating the unfolding Kingdom of God

To help religious and communities prepare for the next Chapter, we are publishing a series of reflections on its theme: “The Kingdom of God is at hand” (Mk 1:15). Living and proclaiming the hope of the Gospel”. Here is the contribution of Fr. Benoît Bigard, Provincial of Europe.

I don’t know about the formation of other Assumptionists, but for my part I have hardly heard of this “Examination of the Kingdom”, whereas Fr. Jean-Paul Péri-er-Muzet mentions in his biography of Fr. Edgar Bourque: “Fr. Bourque likes to give, transcribed, the famous (sic) *Examen du Règne* or *Chemin pour le Règne* which Fr. d’Alzon used to talk about with his first religious and of which the founder of the Assumption left the text in the form of an evening prayer in his *Spiritual Writings*, page 918.

In fact, this evening prayer, “*Come and live in me, become incarnate in me...*”, evokes above all the theme of the mystical incarnation of Christ in us, until we can say with the Apostle Paul: “*I live, but it is no longer I, but Christ who lives in me.* (Gal 2:20). By the way, I did not find any mention of “Examination of the Kingdom” or “The Way of the Kingdom” in the online writings of Fr. d’Alzon. It must be said that our founder was not fond of ready-made recipes or pre-made exercises. I think that this “*Examen du Royaume*” is like the Meditation when Fr. d’Alzon explains:

“You asked me at the General Chapter to lay down some principles on prayer. The more I think about fulfilling your intention, the more I find myself in a certain obscurity. So many masters have written on this subject that I do not know what to add to what has been said. It is not the subject matter that bothers me, it is the embarrassment of choice. I will try, however, to give you some indications which will help you to form the spirit of our prayer, rather than to throw it into such

a uniform mold that it would end up becoming a mechanical operation”... And to add: as to “an indispensable method of prayer. There are several, and I do not insist much on the choice.” (E.S. pp. 215-216)

Certainly, Fr. d’Alzon was very much given to interior examinations, since it suffices to reread the end of each chapter of the *Directory* to find a series of questions that allow one to make one’s own interior examination concerning the subject exposed. But can we summarize all these questions in a structured “*Examen du Règne*”? Certainly not! However, I do not think I am mistaken in pointing out that the first question found in the *Directory* is the most important one for Fr. d’Alzon, and tells us something about this Reign Examination: “*Is Jesus Christ my all?* (ES p. 20). He develops it further in its apostolic dimension: “*Do I have a burning heart for Jesus Christ and for what he loves? Do I want to pray? Do I want to suffer?... Do I want to fight? ... Do I want, according to my infirmity, to be an apostle for him?* (ES p. 81)

In short, since Fr. d’Alzon takes a broad view of the multiple interior examinations that we could make, and since he did not leave us with a condensed formulation ready for use, about fifteen years ago I let myself go with my own formulation of an “Examination of the Kingdom” in the line of Fr. Bourque. This was born in the context of the structuring of a group of the Lay-Religious Alliance in Quebec City and was used during our monthly meetings to reread the past weeks from the point of view of our con- ▶

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tribution, or not, to the unfolding of the Kingdom in us, among us and around us.

Here is an updated presentation.

A) Examination or active contemplation?

“Contemplation and action are united for us in the same goal: to serve the extension of the reign of Jesus Christ...” (ES p. 79)

In Fr. d’Alzon’s time, we used to speak of a particular examination, an examination of conscience. During the time of Catholic Action, the “Revision of Life” was developed. In the Ignatian tradition we like the “Prayer of the Covenant”. For my part, I propose an “Active Contemplation of the Kingdom”.

In fact, the examination of conscience has the double disadvantage of being too self-centered and certainly also too self-righteous. The rereading of life, or revision of life, has its own logic (seeing, judging, acting) reformulated in many ways (for example: extracting, purifying, accomplishing); it still has all its value today, but it is not specifically linked to our spirituality of the Kingdom. The prayer of the Covenant comes much closer to what I would like to share, but it does not directly evoke the Kingdom unfolding in us, among us, around us.

Why then speak of “Active Contemplation of the Kingdom”? Basically because the Kingdom of God has been unfolding since the foundation of the world, and more particularly since Jesus of Nazareth came to break the glass ceiling that prevented Creation from fully corresponding to God’s plan. Since the event of Jesus Christ, the Kingdom of God is already here, on the march, even if it is not yet fully realized!



The Round of the Elect, by Fra Angelico (Convent of San Marco, Florence)

We therefore firmly believe, beyond all the upheavals of history, that God’s plan will succeed, that his Creation is moving towards a beautiful end: the Kingdom! The aim of this “Active Contemplation of the Kingdom”, of this “Examination of the Kingdom” consists therefore in discerning and contemplating the action of the Spirit who is bringing about the Kingdom of God - whether I contribute to it or not - in order to give thanks for it, and then, **in the same movement, to exercise my desire for the Kingdom of God in the face of that which prevents it from being there in fullness.**

I love to contemplate Nature, a forest, a beautiful oak tree, a deer... all this life that unfolds and that does not need us, some even going so far as to say that Mother Nature would be better off without humans (which I do not believe it is because the project of Creation is global and the human being holds a proper and singular place in it...). What a satisfaction, in any case, following this time of contemplation, to be able to realize that Creation is unfolding, whether I contribute to it or not, and to be thus put back in my very modest place, where everything does not depend on me, where I do not have

to carry everything on my shoulders but simply to do my small part to contribute to this unfolding of God's project.

It is not a question, therefore, of examining my conscience, of dwelling on the past, or of burdening myself, but on the contrary, of decentering myself **in order to make the coming of the Kingdom the horizon of the world's life.** Moreover, what is lacking for the coming of the Kingdom is not only of the order of "sin", but also of the **time offered by God for Creation to unfold and move towards its fullness...**

This active contemplation can therefore be lived in three stages:

- **Contemplate:** What signs have I been able to perceive of the unfolding of the Kingdom of God?

- **Examine:** What has contributed to, or opposed, the coming of the Kingdom of God?

- **Commitment:** What new desire to commit oneself concretely does this arouse?

B) Towards a concise formulation of this active contemplation

"We propose above all to work, for love of Christ, for the coming of the Kingdom of God in us and around us." (Rule of Life n. 1)

*"Our motto, *Adveniat regnum tuum*, gives us this general thought. We wish to contribute, as much as it depends on us, to the advent of the reign of the three persons of the Holy Trinity, and in so doing, we will combat the three great errors of modern times. [...] **The reign of God the Father in the universe, the reign of God the Son in the Church, the reign of God the Holy Spirit in souls, such, it seems to me, must be the mother thought of***

the Assumption family. (3rd letter to the novice master, 1868. ES p. 161)

How can we make a binary expression - "in us and around us" - fit into a Trinitarian logic: the reign of God the Father in the universe, the reign of God the Son in the Church, the reign of God the Holy Spirit in souls? Like others, I resolved the question by reformulating the expression usually used by Fr. d'Alzon with a Trinitarian version: to make the reign of God happen in me, among us and around us! This allows us to reformulate in a concise way an "Examination of the Kingdom", an "Active Contemplation of the Kingdom of God in the process of unfolding":

Looking back on the day, the week, the month...

And by cultivating the desire to bring about the reign of God: in me (reign of the Holy Spirit), among us (reign of God the Son) and around us (reign of God the Father):

I contemplate: what signs have I been able to perceive of the unfolding of this reign in me, among us, around us?

I examine: what has contributed to, or opposed, the coming of the reign in me, among us, around us?

I commit myself: on a particular point, resulting from my rereading, what do I wish to live to better contribute to the coming of the reign of God in me, among us, around us?

C) The coming of the reign of the three persons of the Trinity

1 - Bringing about the reign of God in me, personal dimension, reign of the Holy Spirit in souls

Faced with a world neglecting the Christian virtues...

If the community dimension, which we will see later, is - from a certain point of view - almost absent in Fr. d'Alzon's life, and if the goal of his foundation is clearly apostolic, this in no way diminishes the importance he gives to the personal dimension of this reign of God over the soul of the religious. I would even say that the vast majority of his spiritual writings deal with this subject: how can we "strive to make the reign of God triumph within us"? How do we allow God to reign in our souls? How can I make Jesus Christ my all and be configured to him?

Fr. d'Alzon speaks well on several occasions of the importance of allowing the Holy Spirit to reign in our souls: "*What an insult it is to have a God in one's heart and not to glorify him, as is fitting! Yet this is how we treat the Holy Spirit with incredible lightness*" (ES p. 904), but let us recognize that he speaks much more abundantly of making Jesus Christ reign in us. So the apparently clear division of the reigns of the three persons found in the third letter to the master of novices (see above) is not to be made an absolute; it is, however, practical for the exercise of active Contemplation of the reign that we propose!

Here then, among an infinite **number of possible questions**, in addition to all those already present in the *Spiritual Writings*, is a small personal selection for this examination of God's reign in me...

- Have I taken the time to give thanks for all the blessings and gifts of God that I have received?

- Have I taken steps to grow in the Gospel virtues, using the ▶

Virgin Mary and the saints as examples?

- Have I taken time to nourish my relationship with Christ? Regular prayer? Meditation on the Word of God? Reading to deepen my faith?

- Does the framework of life that I have given myself (rhythm, schedule, personal commitments...) allow the Kingdom to unfold in me? Am I not wasting too much time in the use of the means of social communication to the detriment of my interiority?

- Have I allowed the Spirit of God to irrigate all the dimensions of my life? "This is what the Spirit produces: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, humility and self-control" (Gal 5:22). (Gal 5:22) *"A branch will come out of the stock of Jesse, the father of David, a shoot will spring up from its roots. On it will rest the spirit of the Lord: the spirit of wisdom and discernment, the spirit of counsel and strength, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord."* (Isaiah 11:2)

- Have I been open to the signs of the Spirit or have I turned inward? Thanksgiving for the encounters, the services rendered, the attention to those who crossed my path... Ask for forgiveness for my refusals, my retreats, my lack of hope...

- What has been the driving force of my days? My work? My state duty? This activity to be carried out? A service to be rendered? An unforeseen event for which I made myself available? In short, have I been an actor in God's reign on the move... Or have I only allowed myself to go in search of my own pleasure, comfort... or some nonchalance?

2 - Bringing about the reign of God among us, the community dimension, the reign of God the Son in the Church

Faced with a divided and individualistic world

I mentioned earlier how the community dimension was, in a certain sense, absent in Fr. d'Alzon's writings: this is not entirely true, but I will explain. You will not find in the writings of our founder the words "community" or "fraternal life", but rather that of house or of edifying, charitable, respectful relationships among the brothers. In these meditations concerning superiors, our founder essentially evokes the bonds between the superior and each of his religious...

Nor do I believe that one can find the notion of "apostolic community" in his writings: it was another era, another state of mind. Rather, it seems to me that Fr. d'Alzon sees religious life as a gathering of brothers or sisters who support each other on the road to holiness: *"Why did you come to seek a common life in a cloister, if not to be supported by the daily relationships you would have with men who would strive for perfection like you? Otherwise you had only to remain in your solitude and keep the kind of life that would have suited you best."* (ES p. 569).

One could summarize, in a caricatured way, by saying that for Fr. d'Alzon, the religious house is simply a place where individuals come together to support each other in their personal journey of perfection and in their apostolic zeal. This would explain the binary nature of the purpose that is attributed to us: to work for the coming of God's reign in and around us, without any particular apostolic mission

of the fraternal community.

However, where Fr. d'Alzon situates in a very explicit and sustained way the community dimension of the unfolding of the Reign is through the mission of the Church and our unwavering commitment to that mission, in good understanding with all the artisans of the Church. This is obviously explicit in the love of the Church that is asked of us in the triple love. It is undeniable that the function of Vicar General, which Fr. d'Alzon exercised for almost all of his priestly life, strongly marked both his apostolic conception of our religious life (which rests on the zeal of each member, rather than on apostolic communities in themselves) and his conception of a commitment to the Church, frank, generous, and in good understanding with the diocesan clergy, other congregations, and all the pastoral agents of the Church.

It is therefore a question of approaching this question of the deployment of the Reign among us, the Reign of God the Son in the Church, starting from the different cells of the Church to which we belong: our family and our loved ones, our Christian community, our religious family, our Church in the broadest sense.

Here, then, among many other possible questions, is a **small series of questions** for this examination of the coming of the reign of God among us:

- My family and loved ones: Am I grateful for my personal and family journey? Have I been attentive to those who are close to me, especially those who are going through a trial? Thanksgiving for the beautiful gestures made... and desire to go further for my difficulties in loving.

- My Christian community: Do I enjoy being with my broth-



Christ Pantocrator (Saint Sophia Basilica, Istanbul)

are not of the same sensibility as me? Am I capable of being both benevolent and demanding towards the Church? When I think of “Church”, what place do I give to members of other Christian denominations? Do I care about encounter, discovery, dialogue?

3 - Bringing about the reign of God around us, missionary dimension, reign of God the Father in the universe

Faced with a world without God...

This aspect is much more evident in Fr. d’Alzon. If he wanted to found a congregation, it was above all to constitute a body of zealous men at the service of the coming of the reign of God in the world. In his very first notes concerning the purpose of his foundation, he wrote:

“Purpose of the work: the reign of Jesus Christ in the world, preparation for his eternal reign. [...] External means: teaching, education, example, severe protest against the world, gentleness, search for the union between truth and the new results of science, popular action.” (ES p. 645)

In his formulations, Fr. d’Alzon always remains very Christ centered. He speaks more readily of the reign of Jesus Christ than of the reign of God the Father, but for him it is all one, and this is rooted in his spirituality of mystical incarnation: to allow Jesus Christ to continue his incarnation in each of us and in the world.

So **here is a new little series of questions**, among many others possible, this time concerning the coming of God’s reign around us:

- Have I been concerned to inform myself about the life of ▶

ers and sisters in faith? Do I care about building relationships? How does the communion celebrated at the Eucharist translate into greater communion with the members of my Christian community? What support have I given to members of my community who are experiencing difficulties? Faces to remember in prayer...

- My religious community: Is my view of my brothers and sisters benevolent? Do I know how to rejoice in what they do well in the service of the Kingdom? Am I concerned about the growth of each one, beyond the difficulties and characters, by helping him to give the best of himself? Does the quality of our community

life (fraternal life, positive interculturality, welcoming guests, prayer life, mutual support, apostolic collaboration...) bear witness to the Kingdom in progress?

- The Assumption family: Do I feel solidarity with the joys and difficulties of the brothers, sisters and lay Assumptionists? Do I have the will and desire to work and collaborate with each other? Thanksgiving for what our spiritual family is doing in the service of the Kingdom and the desire to go further, to live better the charism entrusted to us in the service of the Church and the world...

- The Church: Do I love the Church? Do I have the desire to be Church, even with those who



The Sermon on the Mount (13th century illumination)

the world? To rejoice in what is good, in what is beautiful and good, in what speaks to me of the Kingdom on the move... and to become aware of the suffering experienced, of the injustices, of the road still to be travelled?

- Has my way of living, but also the way of living of my environment, contributed to promoting inequality or injustice? When I buy something, is it only the price that counts? What about the whole chain that made it possible to acquire this good: is the way it was produced and put on sale respectful of nature, of people, of justice? I can give thanks for the habits of life that seem to me to be going in the right direction and rekindle my desire to change again what is disrespectful of nature, what wastes the common good, what increases the gulf between poor and rich....

- Am I a man of action? Do I have the desire to bring about the Kingdom of God? Kingdom of justice and peace? Am I committed to those who organize themselves to make things happen and to fight against injustice, inequality and misery, here and elsewhere?

- Do I care to be an educator, to serve the truth, to denounce rumors and false news? To accompany people in their discernment in the face of all the new questions that may arise?

- Am I a man of unity or of division? Am I able to dialogue with members of other religions? Am I capable of bearing witness to my faith while gathering and welcoming what is true, beautiful and good in others? Do I have the desire to act in favor of the common good with all people of good will, beyond all divisions of religious, philosophical or hu-

man wisdom?

- Do I have the concern to approach the digital space as a place conducive to meeting, to fraternity, to evangelization, without letting myself be manipulated by the commercial logic of digital technologies?

- Am I listening to the existential questions, the search for meaning and the sufferings of those I encounter? Do I have the desire to announce the Good News of Jesus Christ? Have I taken this or that opportunity to speak about it?

By way of conclusion

I am well aware of the multiplicity of the questions asked and of the questions that are still possible: it is certainly not a question of taking them all up again each time. The only purpose of this small enumeration was to evoke the field of possibilities when it comes to examining the advent of the reign of God in me, among us and around us, in the context of this beginning of the 21st century.

I prefer, therefore, by way of a final word, to refer to the formulation proposed in the box above of this “Active Contemplation of the Kingdom of God in the process of unfolding”, hoping that from time to time, or even regularly, this reformulated “Examination of the Kingdom” may support our Assumptionist walk.

And may the horizon of this Kingdom of God, in the process of unfolding and advancing towards its success, be the driving force of our thoughts, our actions, our prayer and... our rest!

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