

ASSUMPTIONISTS, LET US REKINDLE OUR LOVE FOR THE CHURCH



SECOND LETTER FROM THE SUPERIOR GENERAL
AND THE GENERAL CURIA
TO THE CONGREGATION

INTRODUCTION

Collective letter or special issue? That may be the question you're asking yourself as you receive this 2nd "Letter from the Superior General". Yes, this letter is a joint publication of the Ordinary General Council. It looks like a special edition because it's out of the ordinary. Indeed, animating the Congregation is a responsibility we carry as a team. It is in this spirit that the initiative to publish this letter, signed by the entire General Curia, was born.

Producing a joint publication is much more than a simple method of organization and efficiency: it's the living testimony of a deep desire to walk together as an animation team. It fosters communion, stimulates creativity and enables us to shoulder a responsibility together. In this way, everyone discovers the richness of each other's gifts. Far from blurring identities, this teamwork enhances and harmonizes them in the service of a common mission. It's the fruit of shared discernment, where dreams take shape in complementarity and mutual trust.

"Assumptionists, let us rekindle our love for the Church!" The title of this publication is no accident. It was carefully chosen, taking into account current ecclesial realities. We felt that an important aspect of our charism - love of the Church - could help us develop the right attitudes, because the stakes are so high. Our underlying intention is to address the issues of the day, and to bring a relevant and enlightening message to bear on them.

What's more, this publication comes during the Jubilee Year. A true time of grace, an urgent call to renewal for our world, and especially for our mother the Church. We are invited to live it under the burning sign of hope. In these sometimes troubled times, this Holy Year reminds us that God remains our rock, an inexhaustible source of mercy and new

life. During this jubilee year, we are called to rekindle our faith, to believe anew that paths of fraternity, justice and peace are possible.

As Assumptionists, sons and daughters of Fr. d'Alzon, our love for the Church remains unwavering. Our Founder passed on to us this passion for a living Church, loved despite its imperfections. To love the Church is also to have the lucidity to recognize its wounds, the courage to face them, and the faith to continue to hope in the coming of the Kingdom of God, which, despite the trials, tirelessly pursues its path. With God, the future is both open and full of promise.

How can we be resolved in our love for Mother Church, one, holy, catholic and apostolic? We have no shortage of guides. Our founder, Fr. d'Alzon, our patriarch, St. Augustine, and many other witnesses, show us the way. By their example, they invite us to constantly rekindle our love for the Church, despite her imperfections, and to love her as she is, in her beauty as in her wounds: an act of faith rooted in the mystery of Christ who loved her to the point of giving himself up for her (cf. Eph 5:25).

Rome, June 20, 2025.

Very Rev. NGOA Ya Tshihemba
Superior General

LET US LOVE THE CHURCH TOGETHER WITH SAINT AUGUSTINE!

Such a vast and rich theme cannot be developed in these few lines. This sharing can inspire us to delve deeper with Saint Augustine into the love of the Church, to constantly rekindle in us this element of spirituality and charism that is so dear to our religious family. In his great passion for the Church, Saint Augustine exhorts us to love our mother, to love the Church, the Body of Christ. Let's listen to his exhortations, based on two quotations!

Let us love our Mother, the Church!

"Let us love the Lord our God, and love his Church (...) He as our Father, she as our mother. Let no one say: no doubt, I have recourse to idols, I consult diviners and sorcerers; but I do not abandon the Church of God, I am a Catholic: faithful to your mother, you would then offend your Father. Another says: far be it from me to consult sorcerers, to seek out demoniacs, to resort to sacrilegious divinations; I don't go to worship demons, I don't serve stones; but I'm on Donatus' side. What use is it to you not to have offended your Father, who will be compelled to avenge the offense done to your mother?" (Saint Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 88, 2, 14; PL 37, 1140).

The Church is our Mother

Speaking of God as Father, Saint Augustine presents the Church as our mother. Together with God the Father, the Church begets for eternal life. (1) She gives birth to new children of God, who are also her children. She nurtures and cares for them. Following in Christ's footsteps, she must adapt to the smallness of her children. She shows her maternal tenderness by running after the lost sheep, caring for the weak and wounded. With the heart of a true mother, she lavishes

love and forgiveness on her own sinful children. She continues Christ's mission: to reveal the Father's tenderness. The Church, our mother, is patient with her children, who are both saints and sinners. She must allow the weeds and the good grain to grow together until the harvest (Mt 13:29-30).

With the cooperation of Christ and the Holy Spirit acting through human beings, Mother Church teaches her children how to love God and neighbor. She teaches them how to live the different relationships between human beings (*De mor.* I, 30, 62-63). With the texts of the Magisterium, through men and women who lend her their voice, the Church teaches her children and leads them along the path of life and truth. Our patriarch Augustine, one of the greatest Fathers of the Church, is among those who have contributed to the Church's teaching. At his school, "we have an abundant spiritual heritage to discover, assimilate and deepen throughout our lives" (Acts of the 34th General Chapter, #156). The Congregation of the Augustinians of the Assumption has a great heritage to preserve and promote with our patriarch, for the good of the Church.

Filial love for Mother Church

St. Augustine presents an interdependence between our love for the Father and our love for the Church. Moreover, the Church is indicated as belonging to God: "Let us love his Church". Through his Church, God lavishes his love on human beings. She reveals the Father's love and teaches us to love him. All forms of idolatry and unfaithfulness to God are an offense to the Father. And they are contrary to the teaching of the Church, and an offense against our mother. To separate oneself from Mother Church is to go against unity. The Father is involved.

Mother Church, as Saint Augustine presents her, inspires trust and love. Such a mother deserves a grateful attitude from her sons and daughters. This love translates into attention to her teaching, to knowing it, welcoming it and making it known. The 34th General Chapter of our religious family helps us to do just that. It's interesting to see how often the chapter text quotes or refers to more recent texts from the Magisterium: *Christus vivit, Ecclesia in Africa, Ecclesia in Oceania, Evangelii gaudium, Fratelli tutti, Gaudete et exsultate, Laudato si', Querida Amazonia...* The love of the Church is expressed in filial obedience on the part of her children. How attentive we need to be to events in the world and in the Church, to discern the calls in community, province and congregation, and to make ourselves available to the missions of the Church.

The love of Mother Church inspires responsibility in each and every one of her children. For St. Augustine, the notion of Mother Church does not only concern the hierarchy. All her children must share in the Church's maternal task. "Taken together, all those who make up the Church are called mother, whereas, taken individually, they are called children" - in reference to St. Augustine's reading of Mt 12:50 (Qu. Ev1:18; En. Ps 127:12).

Let us love the Church, the Body of Christ!

"Let us run then, brothers, let us run, and love Christ. Which Christ? Jesus Christ. The Word of God... Extend charity to the whole world, if you want to love Christ: for the members of Christ spread out over the whole world. If you love only one part of the body, you are divided, you are no longer in the body; if you are no longer in the body, you are no longer under the influence of the head. What's the point of believing, if at the same time you offend? You adore him in his head, you offend him in his body. He loves his body. Even if you cut yourself off from the body, the head does not cut itself off from the body. It

is in vain that you honor me," cries the head from heaven, "it is in vain that you honor me. It's as if someone wanted to kiss your head by stepping on your feet: perhaps it's with shod shoes that he would crush your feet, wanting to take your head in his hands to kiss it. Wouldn't you interrupt these demonstrations of respect by shouting and saying: "What are you doing, you wretch, you're crushing me! You wouldn't say to him: "You're crushing my head", since he's honoring the head; but the head would speak louder for the limbs you're crushing than for the head you're honoring. (...)

But don't you see, you fool, that what you want to embrace, by virtue of the solidarity that makes the body a whole, is present in what you're crushing? Above, you honor me; below, you crush me..." (*Tr. in Jo. Ep. X, 8*) (2)

The love of the Mystical Body of Christ

St. Augustine's exhortation is to love both head and body. Christ is the head, the Word incarnate in Mary, who suffered the passion and was exalted in the glory of heaven. The body is made up of those who are incorporated into Christ the Savior. Head and body constitute what St. Augustine calls the total Christ, the whole Christ, the Mystical Body of Christ. He takes up the image used by St. Paul to speak of the Church as the Body of Christ, a body with many members; in their plurality, the members form but one body (1 Cor 12:12). The Church has its *raison d'être* in this incorporation into Christ. To speak of the love of the Church is to consider this total solidarity of Christ with his body, with the members of his body.

Love of the Church and the passion for unity:

To love only one part of the body, to cut oneself off from the body, reflects the problem of heresy and schism that troubled the Church in Saint Augustine's time. During his long

episcopate in Hippo, Donatism was rampant in North Africa. Augustine preached tirelessly for the unity of the Church. He helps Christians to remain faithful to the Church. With unfailing charity, he calls on dissidents to return to unity. He addresses those who join Donatus' party. Augustine does not condemn or reject them. He does, however, warn them of the danger they run in distancing themselves from the body of Christ, the source of grace and life. He appeals to them to come back from this waywardness: *"Come, brothers, come, if you will, into the vineyard to be re-inserted. It pains us to see you on the ground cut off."* (*Psalmus contra partem Donati*, P.L., XLIII,30, C.V., LI,12) For love of the Church, Saint Augustine devoted himself to its unity. He teaches us that love of the Church is expressed in fidelity to communion with Christ the head and in his body. This love means living and working for unity. This heritage, so dear to the Augustinians of the Assumption, of commitment to unity, ecumenism and dialogue, can be traced back to our patriarch St. Augustine.

The fruits of recent events in the Congregation and the Church give us the opportunity to revive today the love of unity inherited from our patriarch Augustine and our founder, the Venerable Emmanuel d'Alzon:

- The Acts of the 34th General Chapter devote several articles to the Near Eastern Mission, dialogue and unity;
- In his address to the same Chapter, Pope Francis stresses that our long experience of dialogue with Orthodoxy, as with Islam and Judaism, is precious for the Church (Cf. *Acts of the 34th General Chapter*, p. 130);
- The intensity of the ecumenical impulse is one of the most significant fruits of the Synod 2021-2024 (Final Document of the XVI Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, #137);

- The jubilee of the 1700th anniversary of the Ecumenical Council of Nicea in the year 2025;
- With the election of Pope Leo XIV, the Lord has given the Church a son of Saint Augustine as Successor of Peter...

Loving the Church by extending charity to the whole world:

Charity is first and foremost the unconditional love with which Christ loves all human beings. "God does not want his only Son to remain alone, but to make all human beings his brothers and sisters, he makes them his children" (Ep. Io. 8, 14) (3). The Church draws on the source of this charity to live and maintain communion with Christ and unity between members of the same body. As the body of Christ, her mission is to spread charity to all human beings, without exception. Article 99 of the 34th General Chapter can already help us to participate in this mission: "Our first mission is fraternal life lived in community at the school of Saint Augustine". Our religious family, made up of religious and lay members of the Alliance, who share the same spiritual heritage, must live this fraternity transcending the bonds of blood. Our presence on every continent, and the efforts of our communities to promote internationality and interculturality, bear witness to a fraternity without borders in a globalized world that is sometimes marked by selfishness, indifference and mistrust of others.

As heirs of Saint Augustine, we have to offer the Church this means of evangelizing through the witness of extending charity to the whole world. Through our various apostolic commitments, we have to make our own the Church's mission to work for the far-reaching charity that God offers to all human beings. This corresponds to the exhortation of our patriarch Augustine: *"Love all men, even your enemies, not*

because they are your brothers, but so that they may be your brothers. In this way, you will always be burning with brotherly love, whether for one who is already your brother, or for an enemy, so that he may become your brother by loving. Even he who does not yet believe in Christ... you, love him, and love him with brotherly love: he is not yet your brother, but love him precisely for that, so that he may be your brother. All our charity, then, is brotherly love, and is towards all the members of Christ"(4) (In epist. ad Parthos, X, P.L., XXX, 2059).

As heirs of Saint Augustine, we need to ask ourselves how we can live out this mission to extend charity in our various apostolates. We have to ask ourselves about our apostolic attitude. How openly do we welcome and listen to the people entrusted to our care? Do those marginalized by society and religion find their place in our apostolic commitments? In today's fast-paced world, the growing number of displaced persons and the issue of migration are major challenges for society and the Church. The 34th General Chapter addresses this issue in several of its articles (2, 41, 42, 46, 48, 57, 61,62, 109, 184, 198). We can be proud of our congregation's commitment, as highlighted by the Chapter (#57). Religious, lay Assumptionists and communities are more involved in this area of the apostolate. But, personally and in community, how do we show our solidarity with them?

Loving the Church by caring for the suffering members of Christ's body

The image of the body and its members speaks volumes about solidarity: what happens to one member affects the whole body. When a member is affected, the cry for help comes from the head. Christ is in solidarity with the members of his body. Even if he no longer suffers in his own person, he is concerned by the suffering of the members of his body. He suffers in the person of the suffering members of his body. He

cries out for them, in them. In this sense, the whole body of Christ groans in the trials of all times.

St. Augustine's exhortation helps us to realize that we are concerned by what the whole body of Christ is going through. It contains a strong call for coherence between honoring Christ the head - which is more about prayer - and respecting and loving the members of his body - which is more about works and mission. It's about honoring Christ by loving him in the members of his body.

For the love of the Church, we need to unite our voice with Christ's on behalf of its crushed and suffering members. He needs our voice to make his cries resound today for the victims of social injustice, persecuted Christians, victims of all forms of abuse, victims of violence and war... Solidarity with the poorest, lived out in the various Assumption missions, enables us to live the love of the Church in the school of Saint Augustine. This love urges us to put ourselves on the side of those who are deprived of their rights and dignity, to make Christ's voice resound on their behalf.

Conclusion

Saint Augustine was certainly not unaware of the challenges, difficulties and shortcomings in the life of the Church in his day. But this did not weaken his love for her. On the contrary, he worked more out of love for the Church. He presented love of the Church as inseparable from love of Christ.

"Let us love the Church! Saint Augustine exhorted us to love Mother Church. He called for love of the whole Body of Christ. He involved himself in this appeal. He didn't just say it in his teaching. He manifested it in his life and commitments, which are left to us as an example. His love for the Church

unfolded in his passion for truth, unity and charity. He passed on a jealous love for the Church. May he always find in the Augustinians of the Assumption creative heirs, always ready to promote this heritage.

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LOVING THE CHURCH AS FR. D'ALZON DID:

THE PILLARS OF A STEADFAST LOVE

Introduction

In an exchange of correspondence with Father François Picard, Father d'Alzon, with undeniable clarity, expresses his unflinching love for the Church by wishing it to be like a hallmark for his small congregation: "I don't see what use our little Congregation can be unless we commit ourselves for the cause of the Church." (S.W. p. 999). Love of the Church is part of the threefold love that we do well not to forget when talking about the charism and spirituality of our Congregation.

If each era in the history of the Church has had its own particular types of saints, in keeping with the times to be lived through, the errors to be combated, the needs to be alleviated, the ideal to be achieved," said our founder, "this same Church," he went on, "continues to produce new saints (S.W. p. 987). These words full of hope can reassure us, especially at a time when we are tempted to believe that the race of men and women who truly love this Church, our Mother, is on the verge of extinction.

I would be remiss in my duty of conscience and fidelity if I didn't recall that, in the procession of men and women who have loved and made our Church, stands Father d'Alzon. In word and deed, Father d'Alzon rose to the occasion when the need to defend and promote the Church was truly felt. Among the moving testimonies that honor his memory, we find that of Bishop Vitte (Marist) who affirms: "Always ready to fight (...), he energetically opposed everything that was false, dishonest and disloyal. A Catholic without epithet, he admitted no compromise with contemporary errors, weaknesses and prejudices. He was a true soldier of God, a knight of the Holy

Church, ready to make any sacrifice, and never counting the cost when it came to his Mother's honor". (5)

In this article, I'd like to answer a question and express a wish. The question is: what was the basis of Father d'Alzon's unshakeable love for his Mother Church? And here's my wish: that we might do a thorough rereading to rediscover this foundation. I don't claim to be exhaustive in my exploration of the pillars on which Father d'Alzon's persevering love for the Church rested. I will mention only four, which will form the body of this article.

Fidelity in freedom

Father d'Alzon was a man of conviction. He was not a follower of social conventions that sometimes changed with the times, situations and people. He had the gift of fidelity to his convictions, underpinned by a freedom found in few people today because of the social, family, ideological and cultural pressures that do not spare consecrated men and women. (6) For him, loving the Church was an unshakeable conviction. He remained faithful to it all his life. I can safely say that he would have considered the creedal article "I believe in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church" to be an "unamendable article". (7)

Remaining faithful in freedom means being aware of the ruptures that the choices we make may require of us. Our founder is an example of this. Love of the Church, his Mother, had filled his heart and his whole life. Genuine love, and above all love in freedom, can lead to certain ruptures or renunciations. We can recall some of the sacrifices he had to make throughout his life. He had everything he needed to live a happy life according to the standards of his time, but he gave it up. He was determined to devote his life to the defense of the Church, and to do so as a priest. There were situations that

could easily discourage him. I can only mention the famous "Lamennais crisis". His position was clear, as evidenced by this statement in a letter to Fr. Fabre (August 23, 1836): "I admire how the French clergy receives the words emanating from the Holy See (...) For my part, I study every day and confirm myself in a few maxims, the importance of which my journey makes me understand. The first is that we must always work for Rome, sometimes without Rome, but never against Rome". (8)

Father d'Alzon, in a meditation on the Rule and all that it entails in terms of separation from the world and its mentalities, asks himself: "Where do I stand in this regard? What do I think about this separation, because it should not be just a physical separation like that of a soldier confined to his barracks. It must be a deliberate separation, freely accepted, like that of a son living in the same house as his father and accepting the authority of the one with whom he is living. Is that where I stand?" (S.W. pp. 549-550)

To love, one must be free. The struggle for this kind of freedom must be renewed every day. A Church that has enemies, as our founder liked to say, needs sons and daughters of character. Sons and daughters who defend it against false values. But to do so, one must be prepared to break a host of ties, even legitimate ones. "How many must a religious continue to break? It is something he must do over and over again, because over and over again he can feel his heart being drawn toward earthly things." (S.W. p. 279)

We must also have reasons to persevere in our efforts to free ourselves to truly love. Isn't the temptation to give up always there, especially when good results are few and far between? D'Alzon found these reasons in the mission of the Church. A mission he considered noble. What convictions motivate my life and my mission in this Church that I must love?

Strong convictions

In the nineteenth meditation, Father d'Alzon speaks about teaching. When he returns to the subject of how to teach, he gives some recommendations. The first is that one must teach with conviction. He says: "We must teach with conviction. The teacher whom the students sense is unconvinced is the worst of all teachers. His words do incalculable harm; it is much like those teachers of whom Our Lord speaks, sitting in Moses' seat, who do not practice what they preach (S.W. p. 412)." For him, teachers without conviction must simply be dismissed as a real scourge.

The analogy is obvious. Voices have been raised both within and outside the Church, saying that what the people of God need today are witnesses rather than mere talkers. It is beautiful and good to hear someone express a conviction. It is even better to see them act in accordance with their conviction and say: yes, they are convinced. In this case, what is said is no longer a mere opinion on a subject, but a way of attesting before others: if you see me speak and act in this way, it is because I am convinced of what I am doing.

Among the tributes to the memory and work of our founder, that of Dom Couturier (Benedictine) strikes me twice, first as a son of Father d'Alzon and then as one of his successors. After expressing his sorrow at the passing of Father d'Alzon, Dom Couturier affirms that beyond sadness, he feels consolation. He said: "The Most Reverend Father d'Alzon left behind a generation of children worthy of his faith and piety, and a successor who inherited his spirit, his charity, and his vigor." (9) This message challenges all of us, especially at this particular moment in the life of the Church.

When we rediscover the context in which our founder lived, the goals he set for himself, and the means he mobilized to achieve them, there is no doubt that his convictions were

solid and therefore far from mere opinions. It should be said that the main convictions that guided Father d'Alzon's life and strengthened his love for the Church were the following: God is the sovereign Lord (S.W. p. 46); he must be loved, adored, and served by his creatures. That is why he was convinced that a political or social system that rejects God or fights against him cannot be good and cannot last. He felt called to work for the Kingdom of this God, and ultimately the great mission of the Church. Understanding the greatness and nobility of the Church, which reside above all in her mission, is already a guarantee for persevering in our convictions, which we wholeheartedly desire to be unshakeable, profound, and sincere like those of our founder.

“I will give you shepherds after my own heart” (Jer 3:15). God, who loves and accompanies his Church, will not let her fall into the hands of those whom our founder called his enemies. They are still there. Every age has known them. But God, in the same ages, has raised up men and women who have fought them with dedication and perseverance.

Persevere in trust in God

« In trials, have I placed all my hope and trust in my sovereign Master? » Father d'Alzon spoke several times about his experience of a God who loves him. He recognized that God was present in his life and in his struggles. And, relying on Providence, he undertook works that God blessed. God's blessing was more than enough for Alzon to continue and persevere even when risks and negative results could have led him to rebellion, fatigue, and disgust.

Our love for the Church is a response to a love that preceded us. After all, the Church is God's work. He is the architect. We are only collaborators. We do what we can, in faith, and He does the rest, provided that, in religious poverty,

we say with faith: "Panem nostrum quotidianum da nobis hodie." (« Give us this day our daily bread. »)

God wants our cooperation. But it was not all that simple. Even though d'Alzon was so strong in his filial trust, he experienced moments of despair, such as regret for time poorly spent on an initiative that was misunderstood or did not bear the expected fruit.

As Assumptionists, what is our goal and what is the spirit that drives us to achieve it? Keeping these two questions always in mind allows us not only to define our apostolic priorities, but also to persevere in trust. When we ask ourselves how a man like Emmanuel d'Alzon, who founded a congregation at the age of 35, could simultaneously serve a diocesan Church as vicar general and work to establish and maintain a new congregation, sometimes going through difficult times, the answer is simple: he had a very clear and precise goal, and he was animated by an uncompromising spirit. "Whether people want it or not, I will try. I will succeed, if God wills it; I will fail, if God wills it. It matters little to me! The idea is in my head and in my heart; I must bring it to fruition, despite all the human obstacles that inspire no real fear in me." (S.W. 717) We may need to adopt such attitudes when we find ourselves faced with those who, intentionally or by omission, wish harm upon our Church.

Somewhere along the way, we have forgotten that we have a goal: to work for the coming of the Kingdom of God. Instead of letting ourselves be driven by the love of Christ (the Spirit of the Assumption) that burns within us, we have settled into a routine. "Reflecting on the character of the priest today," our founder said, "it seems to me that one of the great obstacles to the success of Christian preaching is that man shows himself too much and the spirit of God not enough." (S.W. p. 703) Let the Spirit speak in us. Father d'Alzon was always amazed by the fact that a simple speech by Peter, who

was not concerned with eloquent rhetoric, had succeeded in converting three thousand men. "I am very struck by one fact... What is the oratorical value of St. Peter's first speech after leaving the Upper Room? Frankly, it is not great, and yet he converted three thousand people. It was because the Holy Spirit was behind every word he spoke (S.W. 752)." Let us therefore be humble. It is God himself who takes care of his work. But he needs us.

Out of love for Christ

We can be free in the choices we make. We can have strong convictions and trust in God to persevere. But all of this must be unified in a single desire: "Out of the love for Christ." We love the Church because we love Jesus Christ. In serving the Church, it is Christ whom we serve. Whatever your work, the Apostle Paul tells us, do it heartily, as for the Lord and not for men. It is Christ the Lord whom you serve (Col 3:23-24).

Living one's life and mission wholeheartedly, seeking not to please men but God alone, is what characterizes those who love the Church. The possibility of failure is part of our humanity. We are human. And yet our profession of vows expresses this beautiful and noble consecration and commitment: «In the presence of my brothers, into your hands (...), **out of love for Christ and to extend his Kingdom**, I, Brother N..., promise God to live in poverty, chastity, and religious obedience... » The effort to put—or rather, to put back—Christ at the center of our lives and our mission must be renewed every day. If there is one prayer to say each morning, perhaps it is this one.

When our founder speaks of selflessness, he means selflessness that always points us back to and directs us toward a higher cause. This selflessness does not make us aliens. It does not exclude, as Father d'Alzon says, the

legitimate motives that may appeal to us, but it must dominate and permeate our whole life (S.W. p. 1309). Some of the problems we experience in the Church are linked to the deliberate pursuit of interests. This is unfortunate.

D'Alzon affirms that selflessness is an essential characteristic. He adds that it is the rarest thing. Yes, rare are those who accept to disregard their personal feelings for the work of God; those who are ready to give to others the good they have begun; those who are ready to abandon vain glory and rejoice in the good that others accomplish. Our zeal will be humble, Father d'Alzon specifies. "When you have done what you have been commanded, return and say, 'We are useless servants'" (Lk 17:10). This can be motivated by a sense of duty, loyalty, frankness, and a willingness to sacrifice. In his closing address at the General Chapter of 1868, Father d'Alzon sent his brothers forth with this exhortation: "Let us love the Church supernaturally, boldly, generously" (S.W. p. 109). May God bless our efforts!

Conclusion

The expression "triple love" is very familiar to the Assumption. It refers to a particular hallmark of our founder's spiritual heritage: "The spirit of the Assumption can be expressed very briefly: love of Our Lord, of the Blessed Virgin, his Mother, and of the Church, his Spouse" (S.W. p. 6). Today, as the Church, our Mother, is shaken from within and without, the questions our founder asked in his time challenge us in a special way: How devoted have I been to her? How much gratitude have I shown her? In other words, how have I shown my love for the Church? Do my way of life, my actions, my words, and my teaching reflect the love that Father d'Alzon wanted to be total?

Our responsibility, wherever we are as Assumptionists—in parishes, schools, the media, and other social works—is not simply a responsibility for managing affairs, even though this must be done well, but rather a responsibility for incarnation. As sons of Father d'Alzon, we are called to be concrete representations of this spirit of the Assumption, which unfolds in three loves: love for Our Lord, for the Blessed Virgin, his Mother, and for the Church, his Spouse.

Good will alone is not enough. To get through the current crises in the Church, some sacrifices will be necessary. This is never without risk. Those who truly love the Church must be prepared to face these risks. For there is a greater cause or good. Freedom and firm convictions supported by unconditional love can help us. May the nobility of Father d'Alzon's spiritual inspiration rekindle our duty of fidelity and memory.

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Superior General

« ACCUSE, ACCUSE YOUR MOTHER! » HOS 2:4

LOVING THE CHURCH'S CONVERSION!

« *The Church must be relentlessly made lovable [...]
The Church must be relentlessly made loving. (10)*

« Accuse your mother, accuse! for she is not my wife, and I am not her husband. Let her remove her prostitution from her face, her adultery from between her breasts She ran after her lovers and forgot me!.....Oracle of the Lord. Well, I will seduce her, I will lead her into the desert and speak to her heart. And from there I will give her back her vineyards and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope, and there she will respond as in the days of her youth, as in the day she came up from the land of Egypt.... » (Hos 2:4-24)

The Old Testament is full of texts in which, through the prophets, the Lord condemns the infidelity and sins of his people in order to open their eyes to their turpitude, with a view to a profound conversion and a return to the true Covenant desired by the Lord. “*Accuse your mother, accuse...*”! Yes, the time of silence and inappropriate “defense” of the institutional Church is completely over. The prophet Hosea, once again, already said this in the face of the infidelities of the Chosen People:

« Beware! Let no one dare to defend himself, let no one argue, let neither your people nor you, priest, dare to plead! You will stumble by day, and the prophet will stumble with you by night; I will silence your mother, and my people will be silenced for lack of knowledge. Since you have rejected knowledge, I will reject you, and you will no longer be my priest. You have forgotten the instruction of your God; I will also forget your sons. All of them have sinned against me; I will change their glory into shame. They feed on the sin of my people and are greedy for their iniquity. The same fate will

befall the people and the priest. I will make them account for their conduct and repay them for their deeds » (Hos 4: 1-9)

But this anger of God is rooted in his unwavering love for his people, a love that wants the best for his beloved:

“My heart is troubled within me, and my compassion is aroused. I will not give vent to my fierce anger, nor will I destroy Ephraim, for I am God and not man; I am the Savior of Israel. I will not come with wrath.” (Hos 11:8b-9)

These few passages from the prophet Hosea seem to me to accurately describe the kind of love of the Church that we need to practice in this time of ongoing revelations of scandals and systemic dysfunctions within it. As the prophet says, we must first look courageously at what we would rather not see; we must become aware of the seriousness of the facts and the terrible consequences that follow; not to defend the indefensible and, above all, to seize this grim moment to bring about a decisive conversion—both individual and ecclesial—toward a Church that is more faithful than ever to the Gospel. It is therefore a matter of loving a Church in conversion, that is, of loving the conversion of the Church!

In the context of an international congregation

Thirty years ago in France, when we heard about the sex scandals in the Church in Canada or the United States, many thought that this problem was unique to the American continent and that “our” Church in France, rooted in a secular society, was above such things. When our second American Superior General, Fr. Richard Lamoureux, adopted a policy to prevent sexual abuse of minors and vulnerable persons almost 20 years ago, a number of people still thought it was an “American fad” and did not attach much importance to this directive. When, in October 2021, the CIASE (11) submitted its

in-depth report on sexual violence in the Catholic Church in France between 1950 and 2020, a number of brothers thought that it was all greatly exaggerated and was in fact part of an orchestrated campaign against the Church... Even today, during training sessions on these subjects, when I mention the steps taken by the Province of Europe to assist the victims of our brothers, as part of the support provided by the Commission for Recognition and Reparation (CRR), there are always brothers who question the sincerity of these victims who, in their opinion, want to take advantage of the system to earn a few dollars... And to conclude this sad list of those who do not want to see what is happening in their own backyard, there are always brothers, especially in our African countries, who lump everything together in one big bag: pedophilia, homosexuality, LGBT+ movements, sexual abuse, and the West, while the Churches of Africa are supposedly preserved from all this and guarantors of true Christian morality! But how much longer will we be unable to learn from what is happening elsewhere?

I do not wish to point fingers here at the phenomena of spiritual abuse, abuse of power, and sexual assault that exist within the Church in all corners of the world: others are doing that. I recommend, for example, the round table discussion on the issue of sexual violence in the Church on other continents during the CORREF (12) general assembly in November 2021, with Sr. Veronica Openibo, Sr. Mary Lembo, and Fr. Stéphane Joulain (see link for video in the end-note). (13)

But, returning to this love for a Church in conversion, I would like to emphasize the essential role that international congregations such as ours can and must play in enabling the conversion underway in certain local, regional, and continental Churches to reach and set in motion other local Churches. This is true in many areas, not only in relation to the issue of spiritual abuse or sexual violence. We could mention ecological conversion, for example the Green Churches movement (14); educational conversion, with the Global

Compact on Education (15); synodal conversion; conversion to peace; conversion to inculturation, etc. International congregations have a specific role to play in this area. Our religious men and women moving from one continent to another; our congregations reflecting in international chapters; our general leadership bodies—such as a Plenary General Council—are all places where we can transcend local perspectives, open ourselves to a more universal vision, and learn from one another.

A favorable moment to revisit various facets of life in the Church and at the Assumption

As Pope Francis has clearly demonstrated in his various encyclicals, “everything is connected”: universal fraternity is linked to integral ecology; the environmental crisis is also a social crisis; the issue of sexual violence is linked to the issue of spiritual abuse, abuse of authority, and clericalism; problems of governance in the Church are linked to a lack of synodality, a culture of evaluation and accountability...

Thus, some episcopal conferences and some national conferences of religious men and women have clearly understood that the “abuse crisis” is in fact linked to many aspects of life in the Church, and therefore that in order to tackle this issue head-on, it is imperative to launch numerous reform projects within the Church. In France, these conferences (CEF and CORREF) (16) have thus undertaken more than a dozen projects through joint working groups or groups specific to one or other of these conferences. The fruits of this work are now available and cover the following themes:

- BEST PRACTICES after the disclosure of sexual abuse
- VOCATIONAL DISCERNMENT AND FORMATION
- DISCERNMENT OF NEW FOUNDATIONS “A good tree bears good fruit” (Mt 7:15-23)

- GOVERNANCE IN CONGREGATIONS
- Facing abuse: WEAKNESSES AND RESOURCES OF OUR TRADITIONS OF RELIGIOUS LIFE
- CONFESSION AND SPIRITUAL ACCOMPANIMENT
- ACCOMPANIMENT OF PRIESTS AND RELIGIOUS MEN AND WOMEN who are accused.
- ANALYSIS OF THE CAUSES OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE within the Church.
- MEANS OF VIGILANCE AND CONTROL OF ASSOCIATIONS OF THE FAITHFUL living in community and of any group based on a particular charism.
- MEMORIAL INITIATIVES for victims
- WAYS OF INVOLVING LAY PEOPLE IN THE WORK OF THE CONFERENCE OF BISHOPS OF FRANCE
- SUPPORT FOR THE MINISTRY OF BISHOPS
- SUPPORT FOR THE MINISTRY OF PRIESTS
- Establishment of a DIGITAL CELEBRET...

With regard to our 34th General Chapter, the text *“Making the Assumption a Safe Home”*, in addition to a number of recommendations, also identifies 10 areas for action, several of which are similar to those mentioned above (#237-253. The 10 areas for action can be found in #244).

Since the areas of work directly related to the protection of minors and vulnerable persons are discussed elsewhere in this letter, allow me to draw your attention to two examples where our love for a Church in conversion can be exercised.

Loving one’s priestly ministry with greater integrity...

A task force on the analysis of the causes of sexual violence (17) identified three major problems within a “web of systemic issues in which the Church has become entangled”:

clericalism, the suffocating culture of secrecy, and perverted moral concepts.

And, on the subject of clericalism, the report states: "The sacralization of the priest constitutes a **dehumanization from above**. [...] It is the entire People of God who must question their practices and their misguided views on this subject. In every ecclesial environment, at every level of responsibility, care must be taken to combat idealized representations of priests and erroneous theologies that make ordination an ontological change setting priests apart from the rest of humanity." (18) It is in his relationship with the assembly, in liturgical action, that the minister manifests himself as a sign of Christ's presence. Consequently, the identification of the priest with Christ does not extend to all spheres of ecclesial life, and even less to all the interpersonal relationships that a priest has with the faithful.(19)

We must also take care to "rebalance the description of the priesthood by reemphasizing the concept of **priestly ministry**, which defines the person of the priest in relation to the whole Church and balances the concept of priesthood, which, when misunderstood, individualizes the understanding of ordination and disrupts the understanding of faith through a fascination with the person of the priest." (20) To move toward a more accurate understanding of the presbyteral ministry, each of us can reflect on the priests who inspire us or on recent works we could read on this subject.

In contrast to this dehumanization from above, we need to give ourselves the means to honor the human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral dimensions of the ministry, following the concrete suggestions of the CEF working group on accompanying the ministry of priests: *"social and medical support... trained mentors made available... regular review meetings... reflection and proposals for training courses tailored to their needs, whether offered to all (emotional and sexual life,*

addictions, digital technology, identifying burnout) or more specific; proposals for support, spiritual and intellectual renewal... Each priest will be invited to choose one or more "fraternal guardians," lay or priest, whose mission could be to care for, encourage, and exercise fraternal correction."

Another great conversion, to which the whole Church is called, concerns its modes of governance.

Loving a more synodal system of governance

All bodies reflecting on better governance in the Church mention four fundamental areas: transparency, accountability, evaluation, and external review. How can each of us, at the level of the responsibilities entrusted to us (pastoral responsibility, responsibility for formation, economic responsibility, responsibility for leadership and governance, etc.), enter into the new ways of doing things in a synodal Church, a more evangelical Church?

"With regard to transparency, it has become necessary to clarify its meaning by linking it to a series of terms such as truth, loyalty, clarity, honesty, integrity, consistency, rejection of opacity, hypocrisy and ambiguity, and the absence of ulterior motives. [...] The attitude of transparency, in the sense just indicated, is a guarantee of the trust and credibility that a synodal Church, attentive to relationships, cannot do without." (Final Document – FD – of the Synod on Synodality, #96-97).

Furthermore, "if the synodal Church wants to be welcoming, **accountability** must become a habitual practice at all levels. However, those in positions of authority have a greater responsibility in this regard and are accountable to God and his people. While the practice of accountability to superiors has been preserved over the centuries, we must

rediscover the dimension of accountability that authority is called to give to the community" (FD #99).

"Structures and forms of regular **evaluation** of how ministerial responsibilities of all kinds are exercised also appear necessary. Evaluation is not a judgment on individuals: rather, it highlights positive aspects and areas for improvement in the actions of those with ministerial responsibilities, and helps the Church to learn from experience, recalibrate action plans, and remain attentive to the voice of the Holy Spirit, focusing attention on the results of decisions related to the mission. (FD, #100)

Finally, "the implementation of **external audits**, mainly entrusted to professionals but also to religious men and women from outside the institute, would be helpful for governance." (21) "Our communities must be open to outside perspectives: men and women passing through, those in the neighborhood, and those who exercise authority for the community and/or in the Church." (22)

These new insights into the priestly ministry and governance are just two examples of the many areas where we can invest our love for a Church in conversion.

In conclusion

I deeply believe that, as has regularly been the case throughout the history of the People of Israel and throughout the history of the Church, the multifaceted crisis experienced in the Church is a precious moment to renew the Church in depth and move on to a new fundamental stage in its evangelical growth. But for this to happen, the vast majority of the People of God—lay people, religious men and women, priests, bishops—must show their love for a Church in conversion and their passion for the conversion of the Church,

rather than for the status quo or nostalgia for a "Church of always." As Assumptionists, we cannot remain on the sidelines, for Emmanuel d'Alzon's love for the Church was also a passion for its conversion and a total trust in God's plan for it:

"I came to Rome, where I certainly found little cause for consolation. The struggle within the clergy and the cunning politics that are everywhere hurt me deeply. However, I had the good fortune to meet a few people with whom I was able to open up without reserve, and they relieved me by making confessions that explained Rome's current position to me. It is certain that one must have a very lively faith in the promises made to the Church in order to have no fear for her in the present circumstances; but these promises sustain me and prevent me from doubting, especially when I think that the Church has found itself in circumstances no less critical; and then, as the "man"(Lamennais) so well said, it is not a question of victory for us, but of fighting. [...]

When I look back to the past to find a time when the Church did not face great dangers, I do not know where in its history to stop. We are not sufficiently convinced that we are members of the militant Church and that, in the battles it fights, we are often the blind instruments of designs whose results will long remain hidden from us. We believe we have a mission and we believe that this mission will have this or that effect; and when we see that our predictions are thwarted, we believe we have been abandoned by God because we have not understood his plans, whereas on the contrary he is pursuing them with the same strength and the same gentleness, whether for mercy or for justice. I beg your pardon, my dear friend, for making these observations; but, sharing pains similar to yours and seeking the cause, I thought I had found it, for my part, in my lack of faith, which made me fear that Peter's boat would be submerged, and in a desire, perhaps too curious, to penetrate God's will concerning the future of

Catholicism. Emmanuel d'Alzon, Letter to Montalembert, January 16, 1834 (excerpts).

Fr. Benoît BIGARD, a.a.

A short bibliography for reflecting on priestly ministry

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LOVING AN OUTWARD LOOKING CHURCH: FOR AN ASSUMPTION AT THE PERIPHERIES

My experience in parish ministry in certain particular Churches in Brazil has enabled me to accompany a number of lay men and women who are engaged in the process of pastoral conversion launched by the Final Document of the Fifth Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean (2007).

As I have followed the reflections and work of the Synod during the 12 years of Pope Francis's pontificate, I see how useful these years of ecclesial maturation have been and that today, we find ourselves in the universal Church facing the urgent need for an "integral conversion," which unfolds in a pastoral conversion, a cultural conversion, an ecological conversion, and a synodal conversion. The election of Pope Leo XIV certainly confirms us on this path, now with the Augustinian contribution of his spiritual and pastoral experience, especially in the decades he spent in Latin America (Peru).

I would simply like to share a personal vision, within the framework of this joint letter, with the aim of provoking Assumptionist reflection on the condition of missionary discipleship among those who are directly involved in pastoral ministry and who assume local responsibilities within the synodal process of the Church. In this perspective, I would like to propose the methodology of the pastoral cycle as an instrument for moving from a pastoral ministry of maintenance to a missionary pastoral ministry so that we can truly be a Church that is outward-looking.

Starting from our roots

« It is becoming clearer each day that God has been driven out of our governments, society, family life, and morality ». (S.W. p. 124)

In a context marked by multiple political, economic, cultural, and social crises, the founders of the Assumption family were able to reflect on and grasp the meaning of the turbulent movements of the 19th century, like radar guns on the side of the highway identifying passersby, arbitrating fundamental laws for the preservation, care, and promotion of life. They were pioneers of a bold ecclesial response, interpreting the signs of the times from an Augustinian perspective and developing responses in the light of the Gospel.

Marked by the challenges of their context (23) and by their experience of friendship with one another, they committed themselves to community life as “a way of being Church” at the heart of society. These were men and women who suffered greatly in order to assimilate and transmit to their companions the call of God's Providence, which addressed each of them personally but ultimately shaped a common charism. It was a matter of venturing into a life centered and rooted in Christ, poor, chaste, and obedient, living with inner freedom the passion for the dynamic and creative coming of the Kingdom of God in personal and community life as well as in social relations. These men and women, in love with the Church, placed themselves at the service of the Body of Christ, head and members, as missionaries without borders of a universal brotherhood and through various means of ministry, education being a place, a space, and a privileged way to transform human beings and lead them to become new creatures in Christ.

While our founders are now admired figures, in their time they were able to endure uncertainty, doubt, frustration, illness, and a lack of resources, in obedience and openness to the Spirit of God who, in Jesus Christ, guides the Christian community through history. Without a faith-filled gaze on the realities of the world, it is impossible to experience outbursts of love for what is fragile, small, devalued, insignificant, and even foolish in the eyes of the world.

A Church on the move

On the morning of October 11, 1962, Pope John XXIII, in his opening speech at the first session of the Second Vatican Council, declared:

"Therefore, the Catholic Church, holding aloft through this Ecumenical Council the torch of religious truth, wishes to show herself to be a loving mother of all, kind, patient, full of mercy and kindness even toward her separated children. To the human race, oppressed by so many difficulties, she says, as Peter once did to the poor man who begged him for alms: "I have neither silver nor gold, but what I have I give you: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, arise and walk" (Acts 3:6) (24).

The fruitful and innovative teaching of Pope Roncalli has found an echo in the extraordinary lucidity of the recent pontificate of Pope Francis. The compassionate listening to reality and the spiritual discernment that flows from it, the mutual dialogue and humble closeness to everyone, in order to interpret the complex realities of contemporary society in the light of the Gospel, Tradition, and the Magisterium of the Church, are attitudes that have coincided in the vision, style, tone, and strategies of the universal pastoral ministry of both pontiffs. Obviously, the exemplary figures of other pontiffs who have made their respective and unique contributions are

situated between these two poles. I would like to emphasize how Pope Francis' magisterium has put into practice the openness desired by the Second Vatican Council, calling everyone to a new exodus, missionary disciples for a Church that goes forth, in a *"permanent state of mission"* (*Evangelii gaudium*, 25).

Already during his presentation to the world, after his election to the papacy in March 2013, Pope Francis, in very simple and direct words, said that the cardinals had chosen someone almost *"from the end of the world."* What seemed to be a geographical reference gradually revealed itself to be an authentic and clear theological choice to place him on the Catholic and world stage. Eager to be a man of peace and brotherhood with all and everything, in a spirit of poverty, Francis has been a pope of pastoral closeness, remaining faithful and sensitive to the geographical and existential peripheries of contemporary life throughout his twelve years of pontificate: *« Each of us can learn something from others. No one is useless and no one is expendable. This also means finding ways to include those on the peripheries of life. For they have another way of looking at things; they see aspects of reality that are invisible to the centers of power where weighty decisions are made. (25)*

From the outset, Francis was aware of the change in perspective that this choice entailed. Before looking at the world from Rome, Jorge Bergoglio learned to see Rome from Buenos Aires, the archdiocese he served as auxiliary bishop, then coadjutor archbishop and titular archbishop for 21 years. His experience as a pastor in a vast Latin American periphery helped him reorient the universal Church toward a more sober and prophetic style, following the example of the early communities. His experience in Aparecida.(26), during the Fifth Conference of the Latin American Bishops' Conference (CELAM), was certainly decisive. As the main editor of this

Conference, he was very familiar with the Church's proposal for pastoral conversion to promote mission.

The pastoral conversion of the Church, proposed by the Fourth Conference of CELAM (Latin American Episcopal Council) in Santo Domingo (Dominican Republic) and relaunched by Aparecida, was taken up again in the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (2013) as a path of renewal for the whole Church. This is where the process of the synodal Church began, which Pope Francis will now continue by promoting “new and concrete forms of synodality.” (27)

As Assumptionists, men of faith at the heart of life, we love the Church committed to the causes of God and the people of our time. This conviction was renewed during the celebration of our 34th General Chapter, which reminded us of our charism, confirming the anointing of the Spirit that makes the Assumption a precious gift for serving the universal mission of the Church: “Go and preach the Gospel to every creature” (Mk 16:15):

"The summonses of the Spirit and our own reality have convinced us of the need to reaffirm our missionary identity. It is necessary to form missionary disciples and to promote mission as a charismatic path in the Congregation. Without this missionary commitment, the Assumption risks losing its identity and its charismatic substance, becoming reduced to a collection of purely local entities. If we believe that our presence in Europe or America remains essential to offer the charism of the Assumption to the Church and to the world, the path of mission is inevitable." (28)

But how do we receive this call to pastoral conversion in the places where we carry out our apostolic work? How are we challenged in our conscience, in our personal and community practice, in relationships of equality and authority, in the

structures and pastoral dynamics that characterize us as Assumptionists in the exercise of our mission?

A fragile body recovering its strength

In the context of the First Vatican Council, Father d'Alzon understood that mission was the future of the Church. He sensed this direction that he would later give to his Congregation. When he saw how some bishops were stripped of their possessions and how soberly they attended the Council meetings, this poverty expressed something authentically evangelical and truly convincing. (29)

However, the missionary dimension of the Church only became more explicit at the Second Vatican Council, changing the focus of ecclesial movement. The Spirit spoke to the Council Fathers and led them to move from a conception of the Church as a perfect society to a conception of the Church as the People of God, more faithful to the biblical roots of the Christian faith. Since then, the various pontifical magisteriums have contributed to the *aggiornamento* of the Church's practices and doctrines according to the sensibility and language of the modern world.

What Fr. d'Alzon saw at the time, we can also see in the teachings and actions of Pope Francis, who has offered the universal Church the magisterium of a poor Church, with and for the poor, close to those who suffer, those who live on the margins of society, those who are unjustly excluded. Pope Francis has truly continued the ministry of Jesus and has thus given visibility to the lucid theological exhortation of Pope Benedict XVI in Aparecida, when he exhorted the Latin American bishops on what faith in the God of Jesus Christ gives us:

"The first answer is: it gives us a family, the universal family of God in the Catholic Church. Faith frees us from the isolation of the self, because it leads us to communion: the encounter with God is, in itself and as such, an encounter with our brothers and sisters, an act of convocation, of unification, of responsibility towards the other and towards others. In this sense, the preferential option for the poor is implicit in the Christological faith in this God who became poor for us, to enrich us with his poverty. (cf. 2 Cor 8:9)" (30)

The theological clarity of Benedict XVI's teachings, the pastoral sensitivity of Pope Francis, and the peaceful and conciliatory spirit of Pope Leo XIV offer the Church today a stimulating orientation for every baptized person, and in particular for members of the hierarchy in the service of the entire People of God: pastoral closeness. At the Assumption, are we all aware of the direction our pastoral work is taking?

Embark on mission to transform reality

To live out the logic of missionary discipleship and truly be a Church that reaches out, we must review our mentality and, in particular, our pastoral structures, as a condition of our fidelity to the Holy Spirit. Indeed, God does not allow himself to be trapped by our mental and organizational patterns; he always brings about the spiritual renewal of his people, using men and women, saints and prophets, in every historical period.....even if this involves, at the time, movements of opposition and resistance, triggered by multiple crises.

The sin of self-referentiality has caused enormous wounds in the ecclesial body, with a notable manifestation in clericalism, whose many faces have been seen in numerous scandals of abuse (sexual, economic, of authority, spiritual, moral). But these sins are not far from us. We participate in them by adhering to a culture of complicity, spiritual

superficiality, and pastoral complacency. It is true that discovering the structural causes of sin leads us to the need for a profound conversion, beginning with a renewed encounter with the merciful Jesus Christ, in order to live a life as missionary disciples capable of speaking to the world, revealing the joy of the Gospel and the face of our Hope.

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Dare to undertake initiatives and offer gestures of hope

Spiritual theology pays particular attention to Jesus' view of the realities of the world and of people. With a biblical foundation in the Gospels (even though Exodus already tells us of a God who looks upon his suffering people), it seeks to express the power of a passionate gaze that wants to transform everything—not through arbitrary positions, an obsession with theories, or the search for a new status—but through the radicalism of love that enters without hurting, establishes relationships, and respects the rhythm of the process. Fr. d'Alzon speaks to us of this same love: *"I cannot love Jesus Christ without wanting everyone to love him, and that is the apostolic character of my life."* (S.W. 98)

Without this capacity for contemplative gaze, any pastoral agent can easily lose the taste for mission and the joy of being a disciple. The truth that dwells within him and the message he carries with him give way to a devoted activism that is unfortunately empty and incapable of transforming reality. The transformation of reality can only come about through the transformation of oneself in that same reality, in the logic of the grain of wheat thrown into the ground:

"What is real? Are 'realities' only material goods, social, economic, and political problems? This is precisely the great error of the prevailing trends of the last century, a destructive error, as the results of the Marxist and capitalist systems show. They falsify the concept of reality by distorting the fundamental and therefore decisive reality, which is God. Anyone who excludes God from their horizon falsifies the concept of 'reality' and can therefore only end up in wrong paths and destructive recipes. The first fundamental assertion is therefore the following: only those who recognize God know reality and can respond to it in an adequate and truly human way. The truth of this thesis is highlighted by the failure of all systems that put God in parentheses.» (31)

When it comes to our pastoral work, we cannot do without the integrated and holistic approach to political, social, economic, and environmental issues found in the teachings of Pope Francis, especially in the encyclical *Laudato si'*. The Gospel perspective on the realities of our mission leads us to continually review our lifestyle and our way of acting, not only on a personal level, but also in the exercise of our community apostolate and with the communities under our pastoral responsibility (32).

As Assumptionists, we act from the local community and according to certain apostolic virtues handed down by the charism of our foundation, such as selflessness, humility, boldness, and zeal. We are unfaithful to our vocation whenever

we act in an isolated and individualistic manner, because in doing so we refuse to realize the values that express our consecration and the exercise of the gift of self in our ordained ministry. We cannot dare to make gestures of love (33) and have hope if we do not have these fundamentals (34).

With this in mind, we are now called upon to apply the methodology of “seeing, judging, and acting” in our work, as taken up by the synodal experience that guides the Church's pastoral action today. Deeply rooted in the tradition of the Church's magisterium, particularly in "Catholic Action," this pastoral method (or cycle) must be taken more seriously in our organizations if we want to respond in an evangelical way to the many challenges we face.

This leads us to a better understanding of the reality in which we find ourselves. Knowing, here, is understood as entering into relationship, not just drawing superficial conclusions from acquired information, which certainly has its value. Entering into relationship means opening oneself to the newness of the other, making room for the unknown:

«...we Christians as disciples and missionaries are called to contemplate, in the suffering faces of our brothers and sisters, the face of Christ who calls us to serve Him in them: “The suffering faces of the poor are suffering faces of Christ.” They question the core of the Church’s action, its ministry, and our Christian attitudes. Everything having to do with Christ has to do with the poor, and everything connected to the poor cries out to Jesus Christ: “whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me” (Mt 25:40). John Paul II emphasized that this biblical text “sheds a ray of light on the mystery of Christ.” For in Christ the great became small, the strong became weak, the rich became poor. » (35)

We often err in our judgments because we imagine that the sciences we have acquired (philosophy, theology, etc.) are

means of justifying our actions, rather than instruments that help us enter into realities in a more attentive and judicious way. Biblical enlightenment is the door that opens to a spiritual understanding of temporal realities, to embracing the disconcerting logic of the washing of feet that leads us to the cross to act according to what is to come and not according to what has already been planned. To what extent have we allowed ourselves to be inspired as a community by the Word of God? Are we enrolled in the school of those who practice spiritual, communal, and pastoral discernment? Are we missionary disciples for our time?

In conclusion, as the late Dom Helder Câmara (1909-1999) said in Brazil, “*the Church must always change to be the Church of Jesus Christ.*” That is why we speak of a pastoral cycle for a Church that is outgoing and in a permanent state of mission. Mission is the work of the Spirit, who leads us to the fullness of truth and makes all things new. It is not to be confused with our activities and strategies, but in order to participate in it, we cannot do without those same activities and strategies.

We know very well that our work for the coming of the Kingdom is based on the conviction that it is already present, in who we are, where we are, and with whom we encounter. But at the same time, this work is oriented toward that fullness which has not yet been experienced and which always comes to meet us. If we walk together in Christ, our Hope, we will not be disappointed.

Fr. João GOMES DA SILVA, a.a.

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LOVING THE CHURCH: ÉDUCATING YOUTH TO HOPE

It is no longer necessary to recall that the educational apostolate and the accompaniment of young people are among the essential dimensions of the charism and apostolic commitment of the Assumption. Our fundamental texts and our recent chapter history bear ample witness to this (36). Over the past two decades, the Congregation's journey has given rise to two texts that deepen our understanding of our educational mission, which we should regularly review at the personal and community levels. These are the document *Teaching and Educating in the Spirit of the Assumption* of 2008 (37) and the acts of the “*Educare*” congress held in Worcester in July 2016 (38).

We owe this to our founder and to the context in which our religious family was born. Indeed, Venerable Father Emmanuel d'Alzon passed on to his religious family a passion for the education of young people. For him, the Assumptionists' love for Christ and for the Church passes above all through an unwavering commitment to the education of young people, encompassing teaching, school life, relationships among young people and with their mentors (teachers), socio-cultural and religious activities... in order to form men and women of “character.” The success of this mission requires a clear understanding of the child as a person. It also requires the creation of an educational environment that fosters the overall harmonious development of children and young people.

The strength of hope

In his first letter to the Congregation concerning the implementation of our last General Chapter, Fr. Ngoa Ya Tshihemba highlights the multifaceted crisis facing our society, our Church, and even our religious family. He mentions in

particular a number of situations that affect the credibility of the Church within our societies. But also, through the reading of the story of the widow of Zarephath's encounter with the prophet Elijah, he draws attention to the need for faith and trust in the future. He recalls the power of hope, which assures us that the last word belongs to the Lord, to Providence.

Following the 2018 Synod of Bishops on young people, Pope Francis, of blessed memory, had already pointed out the impasse in which a significant portion of young people currently find themselves. The Holy Father noted the lack of interest, if not outright repulsion, of young people toward the Church. And why not the shaking of their trust in it! For him, this attitude of aversion *"does not arise, in most cases, from uncritical or impulsive contempt, but is rooted in serious and respectable reasons: sexual and economic scandals, the inadequacy of ordained ministers who do not know how to respond appropriately to the sensibilities of young people, the lack of preparation of homilies and the presentation of the Word of God, the passive role assigned to young people within the Christian community, the difficulties of the Church in explaining its doctrinal and ethical positions to contemporary society "*. (39)

Young people today need to be reassured in their confidence so that they do not lose their footing and miss out on opportunities for their full realization and contribution to the building of society and the Church. Indeed, young people are not only the future of the world and the Church, but even more so, they are the present, enriching both with their many contributions. (40) Educating and accompanying young people in a way that strengthens their hope thus becomes the foundation of the Church's apostolate among young people and children. Pope Francis already emphasized this in his catechesis on September 20, 2017 (41).

The invitation to join the Global Educational Pact in September 2019 is essentially a call to engage young people on the path of change, which is fundamentally a path of hope, consisting in “giving hope to the new generations”. (42) Returning to Pope Francis' aforementioned catechesis, we can summarize the needs of children as their aspiration to be formed in hope during this pilgrimage in which they are called to live, love, believe, and develop dreams. To this end, young people must be encouraged to take to heart these ten pieces of advice from Francis:

- don't give up when things get tough.
- don't think that the fight to get to heaven is pointless.
- don't stay down when you fall.
- don't listen to people who spread hate.
- don't be afraid to dream.
- don't believe that the world ends with your own existence,
- don't feel superior to anyone,
- don't give up on your ideals,
- don't dwell on your mistakes
- and finally, don't let yourself be overcome by bitterness.

Isn't this equivalent to the profile of the “man of character” that formation in the Alzonian sense aims to achieve? In fact, Fr. d'Alzon's educational project aims to lead young people beyond the disappointments that society might plunge them into and help them to look to the future with hope. They can then integrate positively into today's society and contribute actively to the socio-cultural development of their community. (43)

And, in order for young people to develop fruitfully in society as men of faith and hope, it is necessary to adopt a pedagogy of hope, first by rooting them in their past and that of their people, then by helping them to integrate into the

present social and personal reality, and finally by projecting them into the future. This is the pedagogy used by the Risen Lord in his walk with the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24): he begins by helping them to read history, then shares the table with them, revealing himself in the breaking of bread, and reopens the future. The hope rekindled in the two disciples who were moving away—even excluding themselves—from the community that had remained in Jerusalem will lead them to return in haste to take up their place.

Looking back on the past allows children to identify their own successes and those of their society, enabling them to position themselves in the present. Ignorance of one's past can be fatal for young people. It is common wisdom that those who ignore their past are doomed to repeat it. This is why, for example, abused children may in turn abuse their own children, and those who were abused as children may do the same as adults. It is also important not to trap young people in the present. Instilling hope in children means never labeling them based on their behavior or performance at a given moment. “Doing something stupid” is not synonymous with “being stupid,” and ‘lying’ today does not mean “being a liar.” Educators must continually avoid labeling young people based on a single behavior. Finally, sowing hope means opening up a future for young people by helping them develop personal plans to move forward with hope and shape their future.

Creating safe environments

The 34th General Chapter gave special attention to the issue of protecting minors and vulnerable persons from all forms of abuse and mistreatment. In this spirit, we have committed ourselves to making the Assumption a “safe home” where children and the faithful are protected from any form of oppression. It is therefore wise to reread and discuss

frequently in community or in our apostolates the Chapter's guidelines on the need to establish a culture of protection and safeguarding of children. (44)

Often, when addressing this issue, we get caught up in the legal approach, with the risk of forgetting the fundamental dimension of respect due to the child as a person. We are then inclined to adopt consistent attitudes out of fear of punishment and retribution. Ultimately, we are protecting ourselves, perhaps out of selfishness and self-esteem. This is not bad in itself, since the outcome is always in the best interests of the child and young person. Another way of approaching this challenge is to consider the child as a human being. Taking the child into account as a human person may be more beneficial for him or her and for the community: it may remove the sword of Damocles of punishment that hangs over our consciences.

In fact, why do we demand that children be spared the horrors of abuse, especially sexual abuse? Father d'Alzon had already stated that it was out of love for young people that the sons and daughters of the Assumption should give priority to the apostolate that promotes their well-being. His words, repeated in the congregation's norms on sexual abuse (2014), remain relevant today: *"This is the kind of love we owe to young people... the love of an apostle, the love of God communicated by us and through us, because we have become God's ambassadors to them."* (45)

Love for young people, since each one of them bears within himself or herself the image and likeness of God, is what moves us. It is therefore driven by love for young people that we must provide them with places where they feel and are truly safe. The profound reason for this is that, by virtue of our faith, we are convinced that our commitment to young people is a participation in God's creative work. It is in this sense that the Founder reminds us of the profession of faith of his

disciples: *"Before every child, I must repeat the words of the Creator: 'Let us make man in our image and likeness.'"* (46) This is one of the ways in which we honor God through his most fragile creatures.

This love for children commits us to a process of eradicating all forms of child abuse in our living environments and apostolates: our communities, our schools, parishes, and groups of children and young people where we are actively involved.

This commitment is best achieved through measures designed to prevent abuse from occurring in the first place, as it is everyone's wish that no one should be abused. It is therefore important to design and implement preventive mechanisms that block destructive behavior.(47) Prevention means taking appropriate precautions to prevent harm or abuse from occurring. It is a matter of *"creating healthy and safe spaces and behaviors that prevent the recurrence of sexual abuse at an early stage."* (48) Abuse prevention measures are threefold: victim-focused, environment-focused, and behavior-focused.

In this context, the effectiveness of measures depends on the child's own awareness of their rights and the risks they face in this area. It is therefore important to make them aware of these rights by including in the educational program and training program for youth groups a session on children's rights and mechanisms for self-protection against the risk of exploitation of their vulnerability by adults. Preventing abuse also involves incorporating child protection into the training of religious and our collaborators.(49) In our case, we need to deepen our understanding of our Founder's teachings on this subject. His lectures to teachers at the college in Nîmes and to religious men and women are a rich source of inspiration.

To be more concrete, we can draw on the Irish model of a safe environment built in three stages: the recruitment of trustworthy personnel, an ethical charter, and safe activities. (50)

The selection and recruitment of religious and lay personnel for the care of children and vulnerable adults deserves special attention. At this stage, thorough investigations should be carried out into the candidate's ability to maintain healthy relationships with children. Candidates should also be required to sign a declaration of honor.

The ethical charter sets out the institution's policy on child protection. It contains clear and binding practical guidelines. It also defines acceptable and prohibited behavior towards children and young people. This instrument aims to minimize the risk of abuse within the institution. Each employee must confirm that they have read this charter and understand the consequences of failing to comply with its requirements. Standards exist at the Congregation level. They will be revised in the very near future. For greater effectiveness, the Provinces and works are invited to adapt them to local realities.

Finally, in order to guarantee the physical safety of children and young people, it is necessary, in agreement with parents, to organize an environment that reassures everyone—in other words, an environment that reinforces children's confidence. At the same time, this environment must be dissuasive to perpetrators. This could be summarized as follows:

- the use of open rooms and areas to prevent children from being lured away; also ensuring that these areas are visible to adults other than supervisors;

- the creation of a culture that enables children and adults to be aware of their roles and responsibilities in safeguarding children and young people;
- informing young people and children about how to raise their concerns;
- feedback after each activity.

In conclusion, we are all aware of the importance of the educational mission within our religious family. Through it, we aim at the holistic formation of children and young people, so that they may gradually integrate the cultural and religious heritage of their respective social groups and, at the same time, have access to the inherited wisdom of humanity. Educating children usually means teaching them to live in their environment by providing them with the means to find effective responses to their basic needs and to the challenges of social life. Educational action helps young people to form their character, as Emmanuel d'Alzon would say.

History warns us that this project may be stifled by vicious behavior on the part of adults towards children. To address this risk, it is urgent to be vigilant and to implement protective/preventive measures to block the scourge of abuse that destroys people from childhood onwards.

Fr. Thierry KAMBALE KAHONGYA, a.a.

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LET US LOVE THE SYNODAL CHURCH, FROM POPE FRANCIS TO POPE LEO XIV

One might say this is obvious: that loving the Church, since Pope Francis and then with Leo XIV, means loving it with a spirit of synodality. This major, even central, dimension of the pontificate that has just ended was immediately apparent to the Argentine pope's American successor, given the powerful impetus that was given to the whole Church. This was particularly evident in the unprecedented process set in motion by Francis in 2021 for the 16th Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, culminating in the two meetings in October 2023 and 2024, which are then set to continue until 2028! It is reasonable to assume that the choice of his successor was made, in particular, on the basis of such continuity.

If we have chosen this angle of synodality to approach the Assumptionist—or even Augustinian, as we should probably say now with Leo XIV—love of the Church, it is because consecrated life is deeply concerned by this whole process, and even more so by its spirit. Can the *sequela Christi* not be perceived and lived as a *syn/odos*, a “common path” (H. Destivelle)? In fact, religious institutes have contributed greatly to the preparation and proceedings of the two synodal assemblies of 2023 and 2024. Above all, the reflection of the Synodal Assembly and the final document to which it led give pride of place to consecrated life as an eminent place and remarkable sign of synodality for the whole Church. The Assumption family can only rejoice, and above all be nourished, by such an affirmation!

The purpose of this contribution is to recall how this Synod viewed religious life, and then to explore ways in which our own Congregation can and perhaps should draw inspiration from the methods and conclusions of this

assembly, which will undoubtedly be a milestone in the history of contemporary Christianity.

The contribution of religious life to the synodal process

From the outset of the “major undertaking” that will be the 16th Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, the two Unions bringing together the world leaders of religious institutes – USG for men and UISG for women – were invited by the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (DICLSAL) and the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops to *“reflect on the exercise of governance within institutes and on the relationships between different institutes”* (letter of January 17, 2022).

In fact, the general governments of these institutes had not waited for this letter: already, from October 2021 to April 2022, a process of dialogue and prayer had involved some 224 congregations. The synthesis of their reflections resulted in a UISG-USG contribution to what has been called the “synod on synodality.” Beyond the governance issues for which the Vatican had asked them to contribute, they express in this document their clear willingness to continue collaborating in the building of a more evangelical and synodal Church, as well as a strong desire to strengthen the synodal model, in order to *“walk together as the people of God and as consecrated persons.”*

Consecrated life then left a strong mark on the two synodal assemblies of 2023 and 2024. Firstly, through the presence of a significant number of religious, not only priests (the assemblies of the Synod of Bishops have always included around ten religious superiors elected by the USG, who had the same voting rights as the bishops), but also, for the first time, around thirty women religious, alongside other lay women, participating in the work and voting as “synod mothers” in

their own right! Not to mention the twenty or so consecrated persons present as experts or facilitators, without voting rights but with real influence on the synodal work.

Never before has a Catholic assembly at the global level been so representative of the great diversity of the people of God, in which the consecrated could not be missing! This was in response to the wish expressed in 2021 by Cardinal João Braz de Aviz, then prefect of the DICLSAL: *“For the synodal Church not to be a mirage, but a dream to be realized, we must dream together, pray together, participate together!”*

The consecrated life in the eyes of the Synod

Did the synodal process that culminated in October 2024 live up to the Brazilian prelate's “dream”? To assess this from the perspective of religious life, which is our focus here, we must refer to the final document, *For a Synodal Church. Communion, Participation, Mission*. (51) Let us begin with the paragraph of this document specifically dedicated to consecrated life, in the second part entitled “Together in the barque” and under the heading “*Charisms, vocations, and ministries for mission.*” It should be quoted in its entirety... Let us highlight only the following passage:

They are called to interrogate Church and society with their prophetic voice. Across their centuries-long history, the various forms of consecrated life elaborated what we now recognize as practices of synodal living. These include how to practise discernment in common and to harmonise together individual gifts as well as pursue mission in common. Orders and congregations, societies of apostolic life, secular institutes, as well as associations, movements and new communities, all have a special contribution to make to the growth of synodality in the Church. (FD 65)

The most emblematic synodal practice coming from consecrated life, and one of the oldest in the Church, is undoubtedly that of chapters, where each member of the community has the right to speak and participate in decision-making, following discussions and discernment based on listening to each other and a common search for consensus.

As religious, we certainly do not need to be convinced that this high tradition of the chapter is a treasure from which the whole Church can benefit! We will take care, however, not to forget that *“these debates only make sense against the backdrop of a common listening to the Word of God, thus showing the powerful link between the exercise of synodality and liturgical life under the action of the Holy Spirit”*. And we will make our own this conviction, which is not always easy to accept: “The Spirit also acts within debates that can be lively, as well as in common reflection with the help of outside experts.” (52)

Other examples are given in the final document of October 2024 on such a contribution of consecrated life to the synodality of the whole Church:

- Interculturality: many communities today are “a laboratory that constitutes a prophecy for the Church and the world” (FD 65);
- Mutual accountability between superiors and communities: “If the practice of giving account to superiors has been preserved over the centuries, we must rediscover the dimension of accountability that authority is called to give to the community. Institutions and procedures consolidated by the experience of consecrated life (such as chapters, canonical visits, etc.) can be a source of inspiration in this regard.” (FD 99)
- the rootedness but also the openness of religious communities: “We recognize the capacity of institutes

of consecrated life (...) to take root on the ground and, at the same time, to connect different places and environments, even at the national or international level. Often it is their action, combined with that of many individuals and informal groups, that brings the Gospel to the most diverse places: hospitals, prisons," etc. (FD 118)

We could begin this list with the eminently synodal sign that is community, since it seems to us that fraternal life can constitute a parable for the entire ecclesial community: *"Synodality is neither a restructuring nor a change in the substantial form of the Church; it is the reawakening of the great sign of community within the Church and, through it, in the world," a community understood as "the experience of being and acting together"* (G. Woimbee).

The Synod also points out some challenges to be addressed, particularly in local churches:

- The implementation of a "synodal methodology of consultation and discernment, identifying concrete ways and formation pathways to bring about a tangible synodal conversion in the various ecclesial contexts (parishes, Institutes of consecrated life and Societies of apostolic life, movements of the faithful, dioceses, Episcopal Conferences, groupings of Churches, etc.)." (FD 9)
- The participation of religious priests in the diocesan presbyterate, which they "enrich with the uniqueness of their charism"; moreover, they "assist the local clergy in opening themselves to a whole Church perspective. In turn, local Priests help clergy from elsewhere to become part of the history of a concrete diocese with its distinctive spiritual richness and traditions." (FD 72)

- Collaboration: “Institutes and associations are called to act in synergy with the local Church, participating in the dynamism of synodality.” (FD 118)

Some ideas for the Assumption

Let us first note that we are not starting from scratch! Augustinian spirituality provides us with synodal benchmarks and criteria: *“First of all, live in a household of perfect harmony...Each according to his need...”*, demands the Rule of the Bishop of Hippo. And the spirit of frankness bequeathed to us by Fr. d’Alzon also offers us a valuable safeguard. Moreover, our centuries-old community practice of seeking consensus protects us from serious excesses or deficiencies in governance, but also in daily fraternal life. Finally, initiatives such as the first meeting of religious brothers, held in Rome in 2024, have a wonderful flavor of synodality!

The plan devised by Pope Francis for the 16th Ordinary Assembly of the Synod has been particularly lengthy (it has even been extended until 2029!): this is a clear way of signifying that synodality cannot be limited to a single event, but always corresponds to a process. This also applies to religious life, where good decisions result from a successful articulation between the levels of personal and collegial authority (councils), but also between these decision-making bodies and the many places of consultation and animation: commissions, assemblies, meetings of all kinds... Synodality actually encompasses all these multiple places, to the point that it has been said that *“consecrated life is synodal by vocation”* (L. Sabbarese)!

Why not use the method of “conversation in the Spirit,” which produced such good results at the 16th Synod Assembly, for our provincial/general chapters... and even local chapters? And this does not apply only to their flow: synodality in the

chapters begins even before the opening of these decisive instances of our religious life, particularly in the preparation of their program and the determination of their composition, and it continues beyond their conclusion, ensuring that their content (guidelines, recommendations, ordinances...) is well received by all the religious, communities, lay people, and works concerned. Perhaps it is also necessary to ensure that the persons and bodies concerned are fully aware that they are involved in such synodality! Beyond the bodies of reflection and government, it is a true synodal spirit, marked by listening to all, dialogue between all, and discernment by all (H. Destivelle), that must thus permeate our entire religious life.

As many congregations have begun to do, we will be able to verify our *decision-making processes* through successive stages of ecclesial discernment: listening to all / responsibility of a few (Councils) / decision of one, in a culture of transparency (FD 84). This entire process will take into account the "*groaning of the Spirit*" that emanates from our world but also from within the people of God themselves (cf. International Theological Commission, *Synodality...*, e.g., #114).

Synodality can still grow in many dimensions of our religious life, such as:

- *formation*, both in terms of animation, accompaniment of brothers, teams of formators, discernment on the part of local and provincial leaders...
- the place of the laity: the Synod calls for "increased participation of laymen and laywomen in Church discernment processes and all phases of decision-making processes (drafting, making and confirming decisions) (FD 77). Formation in the Alliance is not a luxury but an imperative: we have much to learn and receive from them!

- ...and especially the place of women: *“The need for conversion in relationships unequivocally concerns relationships between men and women.....We bear witness to the Gospel when we seek to live in relationships that respect the equal dignity and reciprocity between men and women. (...)”* (DF 52)
- Not to mention the *ecumenical* momentum, a powerful dimension of the Assumptionist charism, which will result almost naturally from our progress in synodality—as was, in fact, a very happy outcome of the Synod assembly!

On the other hand, we could also list the many “sins” against synodality that threaten the whole Church and perhaps religious life in particular: individualism, indifference, authoritarianism on the part of superiors, anti-authoritarianism on the part of the “rank and file,” clericalism, tribalism, “alter-congregation”... This is enough to convert us all, without a doubt-----on a permanent basis...

In the end, to explain what he means by synodality, Pope Francis liked to use the metaphor of a symphony orchestra, where the diversity of timbres and instruments allows them to go far beyond their mere juxtaposition: *“Each one contributes his own part, sometimes individually, sometimes in union with another, sometimes with the whole ensemble”* (address to the consistory of cardinals, September 30, 2023). The whole is much greater than the sum of its parts: it is this *“symphony”* that we strive for in consecrated life, both in the daily life of our communities and apostolates and in our places of discernment and decision-making. Thus, to use an expression of Sr. Simona Brambilla, Prefect of the Dicastery for Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *“consecrated life is a laboratory of the ‘we.’”*

Conclusion...

To avoid ending on a negative note, let us leave the last word to the two popes who have just succeeded each other at the head of the Catholic Church.

First, Francis, whose pontificate will mark history with the entry of our Church into a synodality worthy of the name:

"The synodal journey of the Catholic Church, animated also by the desire to continue the journey towards full and visible unity among Christians, "needs that the words shared be accompanied by deeds" (Final Greeting, October 26, 2024). May the Holy Spirit, gift of the Risen One, sustain and guide the whole Church on this journey." (53)

The common path of synodality is, ultimately, nothing other than that of Emmaus. It makes us renounce relationships between us that would be those of teachers and disciples, so that we may be "*all disciples, walking together*" (Fr. Ngoa), in a diversity of responsibilities but alongside the One Teacher who is the Risen One.

As Assumptionists, we are called to love such a Church "on the way," where everyone is listened to and where all are responsible for the community thus formed. The synodal spirit is not the whim of a few (...including the Pope!), nor is it a passing fad. Nor is it a comfortable path: listening to others does not come naturally, walking together does not come naturally.

If, therefore, we want to be disciples of Jesus together so that the Kingdom of God may come, we have no other path than that indicated by Pope Leo XIV in the first words of his pontificate. Let us dare to say with him:

“We want to be a synodal Church, a Church that walks, a Church that always seeks peace, that always seeks charity, that always seeks to be close, especially to those who suffer.”

Fr. Michel KUBLER, a.a.

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“DO YOU LOVE ME? TEND MY FLOCK”

Introduction

It was an evening days after the resurrection, Peter decided to go out fishing and six other disciples decided to join him. That night they caught nothing. That early morning Jesus, whom they did not recognize, was on the shore and instructed them to cast their nets on the right side of the boat. The result was the miraculous catch. As they towed their boats with the miraculous catch, they recognized Jesus preparing a breakfast of bread and fish. It was their first breakfast with the Risen Lord! (54)

After the breakfast, Jesus asked Peter for three times: “Do you love me? Then Peter would answer three times: “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” After every reply, Jesus would instruct him: “feed my lambs.... take care of my sheep.... feed my sheep...” (55)

St. Augustine in his sermon about this Gospel passage stated: *“By His Resurrection Christ took away the fear of death; and forasmuch as He had taken away the fear of death, with good reason did He enquire of Peter’s love. Fear had thrice denied, love thrice confessed. The threefoldness of denial, the forsaking of the Truth; the threefoldness of confession, the testimony of love.”*⁽⁵⁶⁾ Jesus reestablished Peter from his denial out of fear of death to his affirmation of love as an expression of his fidelity and commitment.

Moreover, through Peter’s testimony of love, Jesus entrusted to him his “Father’s inheritance”. Saint Augustine in his sermon continued: *“And when he asserted in reply his love, He commended to him the flock. For each time the Lord Jesus said to Peter, as he said, “I love you;” “Feed My lambs,” feed My “little sheep.” In this one Peter was figured the unity of all*

pastors, of good pastors, that is, who know that they feed Christ's sheep for Christ, not for themselves.” (57) Jesus gave Peter the pastoral responsibility of taking care of His flock.

“A new person with a new mission”

With this encounter, Peter is “a new person with a new mission”. As Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle describes: *“You will now care for my sheep. But be clear, Peter, that they are my sheep. I am not giving you sheep of your own. They are mine”. Peter will work hard, expend every effort, and remain poor. The sheep will never be his own. He will die for the sheep, but he will not own anything. He will act out of pure service.” (58)*

In a way, Peter did not only become the shepherd of the flock but also the steward of all the Master’s property. He is not like one of the servants to whom the master “entrusted five talents, to another two and to another one.” (59) What Jesus, the Master, entrusted to Him is the whole flock! He is now responsible to nourish the flock: to feed them, to guide them, to take care of them out of “pure service”.

Stewardship now will be Peter’s way of life. Not anymore to catch fish, but to make sure that the flock will be nourished, fed and taken care of. He will be the exemplar of a disciple of Jesus who *“receives God’s gifts gratefully, cultivates them responsibly, shares them lovingly in justice with others and returns them with increase to the Lord.” (60)* Moreover, as a steward, he will manage what God owns and he has to manage the flock according to God’s plan and purpose.

Like Good Stewards... (61)

Probably aware of his enormous task as the chief steward of the Lord’s flock, Peter wrote in his First Letter:

"Each of you has received a special grace, so, like good stewards responsible for all these varied graces, put it at the service of others" (1 Peter 4:10)

This verse reminds us that as believers and followers of Christ and His Gospel, we received an outpouring of gifts. "Peter invites each person to live this gift (*charisma*) as servants (*diakonia*) becoming dispensers (*oikonomoi*) of grace." (62)

Living out the call as servants and dispensers of the varied gifts and graces every religious receives is a call not only to every religious but to every community as well. Every religious, therefore, is "called to become a *treasurer*, a steward of the varied graces that are expressed through charisms and are to be made available for the benefit of all." (63) In doing so, every member of the community, therefore, rich in this gift, is an active and co-responsible member of community life. The role of the treasurer is not only a burden of one person but a responsibility of every member of the community.

Moreover, every community "is called to be *good stewards* of the charism received from the Spirit through the management and administration of their assets and properties." (64) Our charism as a congregation should be concretely expressed and manifested in the proper management of our temporal resources. The management of the temporal resources of the community or even the whole province or entity therefore is a common endeavor for all.

As treasurers and good stewards we are called to live out poverty following the example of Christ...to welcome and therefore live the primacy of the Kingdom...animated by the love that places others before itself...that leads to charity, and thus enters into the contemplation of the mystery of God. (65)

As treasurers and good stewards we are called to live “a moderate lifestyle:” a “Christian spirituality that proposes a growth marked by moderation and the capacity to be happy with little. It is a return to that simplicity which allows us to stop and appreciate the small things, to be grateful for the opportunities which life affords us, to be spiritually detached from what we possess, and not to succumb to sadness for what we lack (66)” ... and to be credible witnesses to that moderation, when lived freely and consciously. Our Rule of Life summarizes this as our way to “live a modest and simple life lived in common” (67)

As treasurers and good stewards we are called to live in ecclesial communion as expressed in the life of the Church in the Acts of the Apostles: distribution of goods each according to need (4:35), having all things in common (2:44, 4:32) and the great collection for the Mother Church of Jerusalem organized by Paul. These are inspirational paradigms for the way of being and acting in the communities of the disciples. We as Consecrated persons, incarnating the poverty of Christ, “are called to make their own the urgency of *koinonia*. It is the choice to follow the poor Christ which leads to choosing on behalf of the poor”. (68) In fact this ecclesial communion is a call for us “to be challenged by those of us who live among the poorest!” (69)

As treasurers and good stewards our life of poverty then, is a loving action or “love in action”. In the story of Peter’s conversion, his every yes to the question of Jesus leads to a command and a responsibility which are expressions of love in action.

Do you love me? Our Assumptionist convictions, actions and challenges

The General Chapter of 2023 recognizes that “Economy is at the service of the charism and the mission.” (70) This is a confirmation of what *Boni Dispensatores* proposes to all institutes and societies. We expressed as one of our convictions that “in a world increasingly marked by individualism, personal success and relationships governed by give and-take, we want to bear witness to another possible path marked by the gratuity of gift, specific to our religious life, by the vow of poverty, by the charism inherited from Father d'Alzon.” (71) This is in a way an expression of how we would like to witness to “evangelical credibility”. (72)

Moreover, to recognize the relationship between the charism and the management of works, (73) we affirm that: “Religious poverty calls for all to work and to and for the sharing of goods and talents (cf RL #28). All religious must feel that it is their responsibility to pay the greatest attention to ensuring that the administration of economic resources is always at the service of the Assumption charism (cf RL #29).” (74)

The General Chapter even suggested some concrete actions in order for us to participate actively in the economic life of our communities to develop possible sources of income: as workers, as mendicants, and as investors.

- “as workers: salaried employment, remuneration for pastoral work in or outside our works, development of food self-sufficiency, good management of our small self-financing works;

- as mendicants: mass stipends, development of local donor networks, appeal for bequests, increase in the work of the Office of Development and Solidarity (BDS) and of foundations and associations;

- as investors: optimizing the management of our portfolios and the use of our real estate assets". (75)

However, this evangelical credibility and active participation begin with formation, awareness and consciousness: To be engaged in the economic life of the congregation "requires specific competencies and capacities, but it is a dynamic that concerns the life on each and all. It is not a task that can be delegated to someone, but entails the responsibility of every person. We are all responsible for the economic life of our communities!" (76)

Additionally, this dynamic happens in the context of diminishing vocations for some provinces and the lack of resources for other provinces. On the one hand we ask: How can we continue the missions without enough personnel? On the other hand, we ask: How can we sustain the mission without enough material resources to support it? These questions loom over us and sometimes lead us to despair and lose hope. However, this issue should lead us to "redesign our path and find new forms of engagement. They should become opportunities for discernment and new envisioning." (77) *Boni Dispensatores* calls it the commitment to "community imagination" which is possible to transform not only institutions but also lifestyles, and to elicit better future for all peoples." (78) This community imagination could also encourage the participation of the greater number of people affected by these greater concerns as what the General Chapter also emphasized. (79) Actually our Rule of Life identifies this as being available and creative which is one of the indicators of the "Assumption's distinctive missionary vocation" (80).

***As a Conclusion: Feed my lambs... Tend my sheep...
Feed my sheep...then follow me.***

Our love for the Church springs forth from our love for Christ who loved the Church first.

Therefore, the image of Peter as the steward of the Lord's flock reminds us that our act of "pure service" is a testimony of our love to feed "Christ's sheep (the Church) for Christ, not for ourselves" and to continue nourishing the flock until the Master returns. It is also a reminder that we are just "good and faithful servants" (Matthew 25:23) taking care of what was entrusted to us. (81)

In a way we are all talented, God entrusted to each of us a mission through the charism of our congregation. "The goods and the works which are entrusted to us as a gift of a providential God are ways for accomplishing the mission." (82) Our evangelical poverty which is an imitation of the "poor Christ for the poor" (83) allows us to "share what we are (poor servants and stewards) and what we have (what Jesus entrusted to us) in the service of others." (84) This is our way of witnessing as servants of the Kingdom of God.

We are all treasurers and stewards of the many special graces from our congregation at the service for others and the extension of God's Kingdom. It is our loving action and loving in action.

Fr. Alex Apawan CASTRO, a.a.
General Treasurer

END-NOTES

- (1) cf. Van Bavel Tarcisius j., « Eglise », in *Encyclopédie Saint Augustin*, Cerf, Paris 2005, p. 501.
- (2) Quoted in *Itinéraires augustinien*, #8, p. 25
- (3) VAN BAVEL Tarcisius J., « Eglise », in *Encyclopédie Saint Augustin*, Cerf, Paris 2005, p. 495
- (4) In MERSCH Emile, *Le corps mystique du Christ*, T. II, DDB, Paris, 1936, p.132.
- (5) Pierre TOUVENERAUD, *L'humble grandeur de la mort du P. d'Alzon*, Série Centenaire n° 2, Rome, 1980, pp. 93-94 (This Mother of Fr. d'Alzon of which Bishop Vitte speaks is none other than the Church).
- (6) A text from the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life puts it well: "The world of consecrated men and women today is inevitably exposed to a pervasive culture of dissipation or consumption of feelings, in which remaining faithful is no longer obvious, and remaining so for a lifetime even less so (...) The current crisis of fidelity goes hand in hand with a crisis of identity and a crisis of belonging to institutions, in that any bond is seen as impoverishing or an obstacle to freedom."» Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *The gift of fidelity, the joy of perseverance*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020, #15.
- (7) I borrow this expression from the Parliament of my country, the Democratic Republic of Congo, which used it to refer to articles of the constitution that could not be amended.
- (8) Letter to Abbé Fabre, August 23, 1834, in *Lettres*, volume 1, p. 651.
- (9) Pierre TOUVENERAUD, *L'humble grandeur de la mort du P. d'Alzon*, p. 91.
- (10) Madeleine Delbrêl, « L'Amour de l'Église » in *Œuvres Complètes*, Tome X (Nouvelle Cité, 2012), p. 38.
- (11) Independent Commission on Sexual Abuse in the Church, organized by the French Episcopal Conference and the Conference of Men and Women Religious of France.
- (12) CORREF : Conference of Men and Women Religious of France
- (13) Round-table of the CORREF :
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OsVGX-He4Uk&t=350s>.

- (14) Sites of the network of green Churches: egliseverte.org ou eglisesvertes.ca
- (15) The Global Education Pact with resources in different languages :
<https://www.educationglobalcompact.org/en/resources/>
- (16) CEF : Episcopal Conference of France
- (17) Look at the final report of the eighth task force « Analysis of the causes of sexual abuse in the Church » on the site of the Episcopal Conference of France »:
<https://eglise.catholique.fr/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/04/GT8-Final.pdf> , p.6.
- (18) Ibid, p. 11
- (19) cf. Note « *In persona Christi capitis* » of the CIASE report, pp. 320-321.
- (20) Op. cit. eighth task force report of Episcopal Conference of France p. 11
- (21) CIASE, recommendation #66.
- (22) cf. Task Force #5 on the « Faiblesses et ressources de nos traditions de vie religieuse », p. 3. Available on the website assumptio.org, under the title Documents/Vie religieuse/Dossier Conversion de nos pratiques (suivi CIASE)
- (23) There is no need to go into detail here. Suffice it to say that, in the case of our founder, it was clear that “the guilty power was called ‘Revolution.’” The anti-religious and anti-clerical movement that claimed to be inspired by 1789, through the voices of its most radical followers, was at the origin of Fr. d'Alzon's reaction and of the opinion of the majority of Catholics. But the energy with which d'Alzon attacks the Revolution—with a capital letter, to personify evil—refers to the subversion organized by atheism, to the project of subverting ‘the order’. Lucien Guissard, op. cit. *The Assumptionists: From Past to Present*. Bayard Publications, 2002. (translators: Fathers Joseph Fredette, AA ; Aidan Furlong, AA ; John Franck, AA) (original title: *Les assumptionnistes d'hier et d'aujourd'hui*. Bayard Éditions, Paris 1999).
- (24) Inaugural address, VII, 3. available at:https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/pt/speeches/1962/documents/hf_j-xxiii_spe_19621011_opening-council.html
- (25) Encyclical, *Fratelli tutti*, n. 215.

- (26) The Aparecida Conference (2007) sought to give new impetus to the proposal for Church renewal of the Second Vatican Council in Latin America, following the dynamic of the “creative reception” of its fundamental axes in Medellín (1968), Puebla (1979), and Santo Domingo (1992). With the theme *“Disciples and Missionaries of Jesus Christ, so that the Living Word May Be Present and Act Powerfully Among the Peoples,”* it benefited from the encouraging presence of Pope Benedict XVI at its opening. The objective of Aparecida was to deeply rethink and relaunch with faith and boldness the mission of the Church in the new circumstances of Latin America and the world, which *“does not depend so much on grand programs and structures, but on new men and women who embody this tradition and this newness, as disciples of Jesus Christ and missionaries of his Kingdom ”* (Aparecida Document, p. 11).
- (27) Pope Leo XIV, during his audience with representatives of other Churches, ecclesial communities, and religions this past May 19 (2025), expressed his “intention to continue Pope Francis’ commitment to promoting the synodal character of the Catholic Church and to developing new and concrete forms of synodality.”
- (28) Fr. Ngoa Ya Tshihemba, Preface to the *Acts of the 34th General Chapter*, p. II.
- (29) Letter 3784, of Fr. d’Alzon to Mère Emmanuel-Marie, 14 December 1869.
- (30) Address of Pope Benedict XVI at the opening session of the Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops, Shrine of Our Lady of Aparecida, May 13, 2007.
- (31) Address of Pope Benedict XVI, Aparecida, 2007.
- (32) “Apostolic, liturgical, and spiritual actions and initiatives will also be nourished by the characteristics of our spirituality: a) a family spirit and communion; b) a doctrinal spirit; c) an ecumenical spirit; d) a social spirit and attention to the poor; e) internationality; f) Animated by a passion for the Kingdom, the Assumptionist parish is missionary and reaches out to those places and people furthest from the Church. (...) This shared responsibility, lived out by religious and laity, can flourish and become concrete in the “Laity-Religious Alliance.” Document *Assumptionists in Parishes*, n. 11 and 15-22.
- (33) P. Ngoa Ya Tshihemba, Letter #1 To the Congregation: Implementation of the the 34th General Chapter, p. 38.

- (34) "Faithful to the intuition of the Founder, the Assumptionists will always have a big heart and open eyes for apostolates of evangelization that are sometimes unusual in the local Church, including: - youth ministry, - apostolates that promote dialogue with other Christians and other religions, - missionary or evangelization apostolates towards those who are far from the parish community or those who do not know Jesus Christ, - a mission in a problematic social context (among a large immigrant community, squatters, or street children, for example)..." Document *Assumptionists in Parishes*, #11.
- (35) Aparecida document, #393.
- (36) Rule of Life #18; « Facing a New Century with a Passion for God » (General Chapter 1999), #109-135; Many gifts in one Body ... so that the World may believe (General Chapter 2005), #37-44; « New Wine into Fresh Wineskins, so that Jesus Christ may be proclaimed to the Men and Women of our day » (General Chapter 2017), #17 and 82-112) ; « The Kingdom of God is at hand » (Mk 1:15) Living and Proclaiming the hope of the Gospel (General Chapter 2023), #178-200).
- (37) *Teaching and Educating in the Spirit of the Assumption*, 2008
- (38) *Assumptionist Education*. Acts of the International Congress, Worcester, MA (USA) 17-27 July 2016.
<https://www.assumptio.org/documenti/reserved/fr/2022/sPb9Heducare%20acts%20fr.pdf>
- (39) FRANCIS (Pope), Post-synodal apostolic exhortation, *Christus vivit*, n.40.
- (40) *Christus vivit*, n.64.
- (41) https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/fr/audiences/2017/documents/papa-francesco_20170920_udienza-generale.html
- (42) Video Message of the Holy Father, Francis, on the Global Education Pact. Reproduced in the appendix *Global Education Pact. Vademecum*,
- (43) Education at Assumption, p. 34
- (44) Acts of 34th General Chapter, #237-253.
- (45) Fr. Emmanuel d'Alzon, 8 February 1846, to the teachers of the Collège of Nîmes.
- (46) Quoted in the Acts of the Worcester Congress, p.32.
- (47) Acts of the 34th General Chapter, #200.

- (48) JOULAIN S., DEMASURE K. et NADEAU J.-G. (dir.), *L'Eglise déchirée. Comprendre et traverser la crise des agressions sexuelles sur mineurs*, Paris, Bayard, 2021, p. 529.
- (49) Idem, #251.
- (50) JOULAIN S. et al., op. cit., p. 536-541.
- (51) It will now be marked as “FD,” with reference to the document numbers. The text is available in all our languages on the Synod website. <https://www.synod.va/en/news/final-document-of-the-xvi-assembly.html> The French translation has been published as a book: *Pour une Eglise synodale. Communion, participation, mission* (Cerf, 2024).
- (52) *Petit manuel de synodalité*, de D. Barnérias, L. Forestier et I. Morel (Salvator 2021), pp. 66-67.
- (53) Accompanying note to the publication of the final document of the 16th Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, November 24, 2024.
- (54) See John 21: 1-14
- (55) See John 21 15-19
- (56) Cf. Saint Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*.
- (57) Cf. ibidem
- (58) Tagle, Luis Antonio. *The Risk of Hope: How to Talk About God in the World Today*. Orbis Books, 2018, p. 130
- (59) Cf. Matthew 25:14-30.
- (60) USCCB Pastoral Letter, *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response*, 1992.
- (61) On January 6, 2018, the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (DICLSAL) published a document entitled: *Economy at the Service of the Charism and Mission. Boni Dispensatores Multififormis Gratiae Dei (Guidelines)*. The document proposes: an ecclesial reflection on the assets and their management in the Church and in religious life; recalls and explains some canonical aspects regarding temporal goods; suggests some tools for planning and programming with respect to the management of the works; urges religious people at all levels to rethink the economic reality in a way faithful to each charism and above all to the Gospel. (Cf. #4 of the Introduction). This section is a reflection on this document. Hereinafter, this document will be cited as *Boni Dispensatores* with the corresponding paragraph number and page number.
- (62) DICLSAL, *Boni Dispensatores* #1, pg. 8.
- (63) DICLSAL, *Boni Dispensatores* #1, pg. 9.

- (64) Cf. DICLSAL, *Boni Dispensatores* #1, pg. 9.
- (65) Cf. DICLSAL, *Boni Dispensatores* #6-#7, pg. 17.
- (66) DICLSAL, *Boni Dispensatores* #8, pg. 18.
- (67) Cf. *Rule of Life* #28.
- (68) DICLSAL, *Boni Dispensatores* #10, pg. 21.
- (69) *Rule of Life* #30.
- (70) *Acts of the General Chapter 2023*, section on the Economy, pg. 102.
- (71) *Acts of the General Chapter 2023*, #254.
- (72) “The evangelical credibility of consecrated persons is also linked to the way in which their goods are managed” (DICLSAL, *Boni Dispensatores* #12, pg. 25.)
- (73) “There is no contradiction between the charism and the management of works: managing according to economic criteria does not stifle the charism, but on the contrary makes it possible to pursue and achieve shared objectives” (DICLSAL, *Boni Dispensatores* #37, pg. 66-67)
- (74) *Acts of the General Chapter 2023*, #255.
- (75) *Acts of the General chapter of 2024*, #262.
- (76) Pope Francis, *Message to the participants of the Second International Symposium on the theme: “In fidelity to the charism rethink the economy of Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life.”* Rome (25 November 2016).
- (77) DICLSAL, *Boni Dispensatores*, #2, pg. 10.
- (78) DICLSAL, *Boni Dispensatores*, #20, pg. 30.
- (79) See #258 of the *Acts of the General Chapter 2023*.
- (80) Cf. *Rule of Life* # 18 and #20.
- (81) “Consecrated persons are called to be good stewards of the varied forms of God’s grace (1 Pt. 4:10), prudent and faithful administrators (Lk. 12:42), with the task of diligently taking care of what has been entrusted to them.” DICLSAL, *Boni Dispensatores*, #98, pg. 131.
- (82) DICLSAL, *Boni Dispensatores*, #99, pg. 133.
- (83) DICLSAL, *Boni Dispensatores*, #98, pg. 131.
- (84) *Rule of Life* #27.

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