The Near Eastern Mission

Assumption's Other Lung

« I bless your works of the East and the West »

Pope Pius IX to Fr. Emmanuel d'Alzon, June 3, 1862.

Above : Fr. Emmanuel d'Alzon in 1863, when he was about to travel to the East.
Cover : Anastasis (Resurrection), fresco of the church of Chora, Istanbul.

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preface

In an essay he sent to the Oblate sisters in August of 1876, Father d'Alzon reflected at length on one of the aspects he considered to be distinctive about the Assumption spirit, namely a commitment to the cause of unity. This was the cause of Christ himself in view of establishing the reign of his Father: to gather into one the dispersed children of (John 11:52). At the Assumption, he wrote (*Écrits spirituels*, p. 699ff), we should make our own Jesus' final prayer (see John 17:21): "that they may be one"... that we may be one with Jesus himself, with each other, in the Church, and in our mission.

Today as always, the deepest longing of the human heart is to live in peace and harmony within oneself and with others.

It is this profound desire that pushes the Assumption still today to dedicate itself to the cause of unity. We want our concern for unity to go beyond words and to find concrete expression: by deepening our own life of faith and our relationship

with Jesus Christ, by living with fraternal charity each day in our communities, and by promoting unity and peace in our apostolic activities. It is our love for the Church, so characteristic of the Assumption family, that pushes each one of us to take special interest in ecumenism. Wherever we are in the world, it is our desire to broaden our particular experience of Church and "to breathe with both lungs", the image that Pope John Paul II used to underline the importance of uniting East and West, the two founding traditions of our Church.

The Assumption's commitment to this cause of Church unity dates back to our founding, when in 1863 Father d'Alzon traveled to Constantinople and soon thereafter founded the Oblate sisters and our first foundations in the "East". Since then, the mission has borne fruit and been transformed in many ways. The beatification of our three Bulgarian brothers has, among other factors, encouraged us to recommit ourselves to the mission, both a presence in very precise places and ecumenical activities and a symbol of our devotion to the cause of unity in whatever place we might be.

The simple booklet you have in hand has an ambitious goal: to familiarize us once again with the history and significance of our ecumenical work in the Near East, to awaken new vocations to this cause, and to suggest some of the ways in which we hope to orient our future activities. We are grateful to the author of this booklet, Fr. Michel Kubler, and to Fr. André Brombart, Assistant General, who has guided its production and publication. May it bear much fruit for the reign of God, to which Father d'Alzon dedicated the two Congregations that he founded.

Fr. Richard E. Lamoureux,
Superior General
of the Augustinians
of the Assumption

Claire Rabitz
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A vocation from the very beginning

Was it not a simple trip like hundreds of others? When John Paul II went to Plovdiv on May 26, 2002 to beatify three Bulgarian religious who had been victims of the communist persecution fifty years earlier, he knew that those martyrs – Kamen Vitchev, Pavel Djidjov, and Josaphat Chichkov – were part of a long history: that of the Church of Silence which had finally come out of the catacombs, but also that of a religious congregation which had committed itself from its very beginning to work at the outermost limits of the Christian East. And the Polish Pope did not miss this occasion to invite the religious of this same family to work for the restoration of unity. That explains, for example, why we saw a large group of Orthodox pilgrims from Bulgaria arrive in Lourdes on August 15, 2006, led by a young Assumptionist!

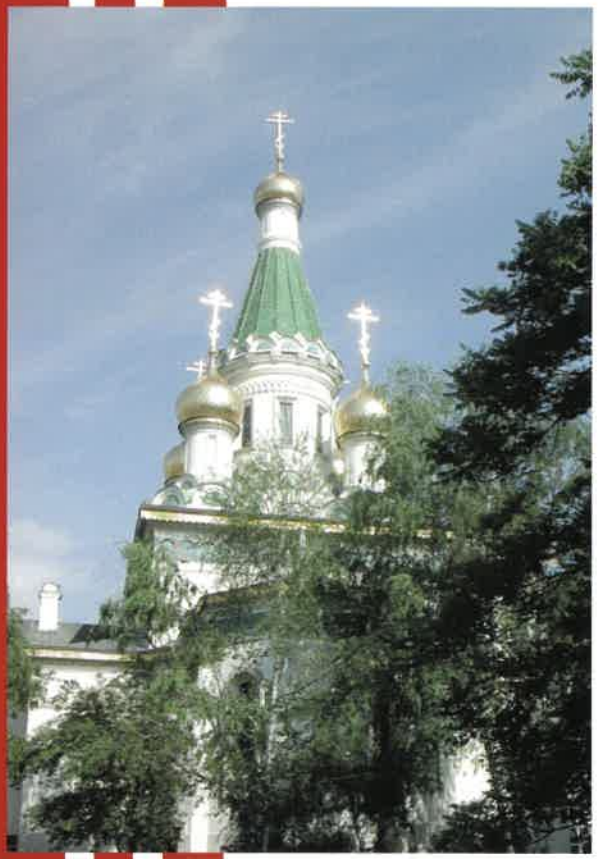
Plovdiv, 26 May 2002, beatification of three Bulgarian Assumptionist martyrs

When cardinals or other religious leaders visit Istanbul or Moscow, they are all expected to visit in Istanbul the cathedral of Bishop Louis-Armel Pelâtre on the banks of the Bosphorus – just as Benedict XVI did on December 1, 2006 – and in Moscow the church of Saint-Louis des Français next to the headquarters of the former KGB! Is this a coincidence? The Apostolic Vicar in Istanbul, the "Second Rome," and those responsible for the cosmopolitan parish in the "Third Rome" happen to be Assumptionists in both places. It is as if their vocation were to be a bridge between the Churches, as well as among religions. They say that they want to be "men of communion."

Has anyone seen very often an Orthodox metropolitan and an apostolic nuncio discussing for hours about the difficult dialogue between their Churches, and doing so very openly and before witnesses, among them a Greek-Catholic bishop? This is what happened during an international meeting on training people how to dialogue that was organized by the Assumptionists in 2004... in a community of Orthodox Romanian nuns. The local media have still not gotten over this...

These examples are not isolated cases but the result of consistency: the firm commitment of a religious family, almost from its birth, to Christian unity, especially in the Near East. That is why in these countries, but also in Athens and Jerusalem, there are Assumptionists and Oblates of the Assumption who are passionate about discovering what John Paul II liked to call "the second lung" of Christianity, the East, so that the entire Church can breathe properly!

A history lesson



Two authoritative statements, spoken exactly 140 years apart, have challenged the Assumption religious family. The first was addressed to Father Emmanuel d'Alzon by Pius IX during an audience at the Vatican: "I bless your works of the East and the West." It was June 3, 1862... and, except for an ephemeral foundation in Australia, the founder of this small congregation had no "works" outside of France at that time! Forty years later, one-third of the Assumptionist religious and two-thirds of the Oblates were present in the regions they began to call "the Near Eastern Mission."

As for the second statement, it was spoken as a fraternal cry for help by Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople to the governing body of the two congregations who went to his residence at the Phanar in Istanbul to ask him: "What must we do here?" His answer was quick and obvious: "Stay here!" That was April 4, 2002. In the middle of the 19th

Benedict XVI and Bartholomew I, Istanbul, 1 December 2006

century, a pope had given the decisive impetus. And, at the beginning of the 21st century, the Primate of World Orthodoxy beseeched them not to abandon a region of the world which, more than many others, is in need of unity. Though they wondered how they were going to manage, given their lack of personnel, the Assumptionists recommitted themselves.

Was the call from Pius IX accidental or providential? It is hard to say. What is certain is that it was not accidental that Father d'Alzon was open to this possibility and ready to concretize it. From the outset, this aristocrat, marked by the strong Protestant presence in his native Cévennes, was haunted by the unity of Christians that needed to be restored. So right from the start, he assigned an "ecumenical" goal to the congregation of the Assumptionists he was founding.

The Near Eastern Mission and the Oblates of the Assumption

Since the Assumptionist mission in the Near East needed the collaboration of women, Father d'Alzon founded in 1865 a new congregation that would be involved in this work: the Oblates of the Assumption. Five of them arrived in Adrianople in European Turkey in 1868. Their "ecumenical" mission began with the witness of their consecrated life and their work at the service of the local population: a hospital, a dispensary, and schools that were free of charge. Something rare for that time was the fact that these institutions were frequented simultaneously by Catholics, Orthodox, Armenians, Jews, and Muslims. Since then, the Near Eastern Mission has almost always been staffed by these two congregations working together, both founded by Father d'Alzon.

Today, the Oblates of the Assumption are present in some twenty countries, in Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Faithful to the charism of Father d'Alzon, and acting always as "daughters of the Church" and as "workers for unity," their presence throughout the world is very varied. But above all, they want to evangelize, work for Christian unity, and serve the most disadvantaged through education, health care, and social services.

- The adventure -

When Father d'Alzon was received at the Vatican in June 1862, he had only a limited experience of the "East" – i.e. to say, of the regions of Eastern Europe and of the Near East – except for an aborted seminary for the Maronite Church in Lebanon. Pius IX's unexpected invitation was motivated by Rome's desire to help the little Catholic Church of the Eastern Rite (called "the Uniate Church") which was coming into existence in Bulgaria, though not without politico-religious ambiguities. One of Father d'Alzon's successors, Father Gervais Quenard, noted later on: "Rome sent us to the Bulgarians who, while still Ottoman subjects, dreamed of being united to the Catholic Church especially to free themselves from the Greeks," ... and, some added, to rid themselves of the Russian influence. Thus was born the Near Eastern Mission!

To encourage Christian unity, Father d'Alzon thought at first of Latinizing the Eastern Rites. But to eliminate their differences made no sense. The Assumption, men and women, would therefore be – and remains today, at least in Bulgaria and Romania – at the service of the Catholics of both rites, Latin and Byzantine, so that it can experience this difference within itself and consequently help the Church's two lungs to breathe better together.

And so, everything started in **Bulgaria** with the arrival in 1863 of a pioneer, Father Victorin Galabert. This medical doctor, who was also a canonist and a theologian, started by founding schools in Philippopolis (today Plovdiv), Sofia, Karagach, and Adrianople (today Edirne in Turkey). Then, with a few confreres and several Oblates of the Assumption who were founded for the Near Eastern Mission *(cf. Box)*, he started colleges, seminaries, parishes, and popular newspapers, on the model of *La Bonne Presse* founded by the congregation in Paris. The Assumptionist influence became considerable on the cultural level (notably for the French-speaking) and on the ecumenical level. Their colleges received indiscriminately young people of all religions: Christians (the majority were Orthodox who for a while were granted Eucharistic hospitality!), but also Jews and Muslims. The heroic behavior of the priests and sisters at the service of the entire population during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877, which resulted in the liberation of Bulgaria, won them the lasting respect of the leaders as well as of the people.

Father Victorin Galabert (1830-1885)

This giant of the faith and of the mission was born in the Hérault (southern France) in 1830. After his medical studies, he took the Assumptionist habit in 1855, then received his doctorate in Canon Law in Rome. As a priest, he taught at the College in Nîmes. In 1862, Father d'Alzon sent him to Constantinople to lay the foundations of the Near Eastern Mission which sought to unite Bulgarians to the Catholic Church. Wishing to be helped by sisters, he obtained the foundation of the Oblates. The first thing he did was create a primary school in Philippopolis (Plovdiv) in 1864. From this school came the prestigious College of Saint Augustine in 1884. As an advisor to the Bulgarian Uniate bishop, he accompanied him during his pastoral visitations and took notes on the daily life of the populations under the Ottoman yoke. During Vatican Council I, Father Galabert served as the theologian of several Near Eastern bishops. Appointed Superior of the Mission in 1876, he worked tirelessly during the Russo-Turkish War, caring for the wounded of all sides. Humble and patient, his religious docility was in sharp contrast with his intellectual knowledge. This lover of the Near East remained in the Latin Rite, all the while greatly respecting – but not wanting, as did Father d'Alzon, to eliminate – the specific spiritual Eastern values. He died at age 55 while visiting Nîmes where he is buried.

Fr. Galabert in the middle of his students: Andrinopolis 1868

Sister Jeanne de Chantal Dugas (1848-1940)

After spending some time at Assumption College with Father d'Alzon, she left at age 28 for Bulgaria. She was part of the seventh group of Oblates to leave for this country. She became Superior of the Oblates of the Near Eastern Mission. At the outset, she lived in Adrianople where she worked in the numerous undertakings started by Father Galabert. She nursed, fed, and cared for the victims of the Russo-Turkish War, irrespective of nationality or religion.

She was the foundress of the communities in Constantinople, on the Asiatic side, around 1882. Father Picard asked her to return to France to be in charge of the novitiate in Sèvres, of the sisters who worked at La Bonne Presse, and of the burgeoning apostolate in Clairmarais. At her request, Father then sent her back to the Near East. She returned to France for the General Chapter where she was elected general councilor. Before dying at the age of almost one hundred, she said: "I have always felt so much at home at Assumption."

Close to one hundred Assumptionists – half of them Bulgarians – as well as a good number of Oblates, many of whom were native Near Easterners, worked in this country from 1863 until the communists came to power in 1948 confiscating all the buildings, expelling foreign religious, and placing their Bulgarian confreres under close surveillance. During the anti-Catholic trials of 1952, nine Assumptionists were condemned "for political crimes," three of whom were shot, namely, the three martyrs who were beatified by John Paul II in 2002. Some of the witnesses of this great trial are still living. Others were condemned either to camps or forced labor. Among them was Father Méthode Stratiev who later became Exarch (bishop) of the Bulgarian Catholic Church of the Byzantine Rite.

Today, five Assumptionists (two Bulgarians, a Frenchman, a Croat, and an Italian), and five Oblates (three Romanians, an Italian, and a Congolese) are present in the country, principally at the service of the parishes and of young people, in Plovdiv, Sofia, and the surrounding areas.

Archbishop Méthode Stratiev (1916-2006)

He was called Nicolas at his baptism in the Orthodox Church. He took the Assumptionist habit after his studies at the College of Saint Augustine in Plovdiv. This simple and smiling, gentle and fraternal man was to collide head-on with the violence of history. Ordained a priest in France in 1942, he returned to teach at Plovdiv and became the rector of the Byzantine Rite seminary and pastor at Yambol. The communist dictatorship was waiting for him. Judged and condemned in 1952 at the same time as his three martyred colleagues, he did eleven years of forced labor at the Belene Camp. Once freed, he assisted Archbishop Kourtev, Exarch of Sofia for Catholics of the Byzantine Rite. He succeeded him in 1965. Concerned about bringing the Churches together, this religious wrote: "The rite is nothing, the Church is everything." He died in 2006 after having had the joy of seeing the Assumption reborn in Bulgaria and of having received John Paul II for the beatification of his three brothers in persecution.

However, Bulgaria was not a goal in itself. The goal of the Near Eastern Mission, clearly defined by Father d'Alzon in its early stages, was to put an end to the Orthodox schism, and therefore to advance into Russia. But, yesterday as today, the road from Rome to Moscow passes through Constantinople, according to the chronological order of the "three Romes." Accordingly, the Assumptionists installed themselves in **Turkey**: in Adrianople in 1867 and in Istanbul in 1883 where Father Galabert had had his first contact with the Near East and where the founder visited him in 1863 to evaluate his project on site. And it was there that, after the death of Father d'Alzon in 1880, his successor Father François Picard sent numerous young French religious, thereby sparing them the military service of an anti-clerical Republic. Houses of formation and of studies were opened for them in Istanbul, and missionary posts (generally in partnership with the Oblates) increased along the railroad line that was being built through Cappadocia, a development which was aided by the expulsion of the congregation from France starting in 1900! But the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913 and especially World War I seriously blocked this momentum. The secularization of Turkey by Ataturk in the 1920s set off an exodus of Christians and lowered the Western preoccupation about Christian minorities. Finally, the calming of Church-State relations in France, accompanied by the fraternity that developed in the trenches during World War I, helped the religious who had almost all been conscripted by the mother-country to return home. The result: whereas 200 Assumptionists (and as many Oblate sisters) lived in Turkey in 1897, there were now no more than 28 in 1925.

Saint Sophia Basilica, Istanbul

Sister Michaël Rainfray (1870-1943)

Sent to Constantinople at age 25, she founded the community in Haidar-Pacha. She actively collaborated in the many activities of her sisters. Thus, while caring for the sick suffering from smallpox, she contracted this sickness herself, which immediately won her the veneration of the local population.

She set up the Haidar-Pacha boarding school that acquired a great reputation. Twice destroyed by fire, the boarding school was rebuilt thanks to the courage of Sister Michaël. During the war of 1914, Sister had to put up with all sorts of tribulations: she was poisoned, and then expelled from Turkey. She took refuge in Plovdiv, from where she was again expelled, and finally returned to France.

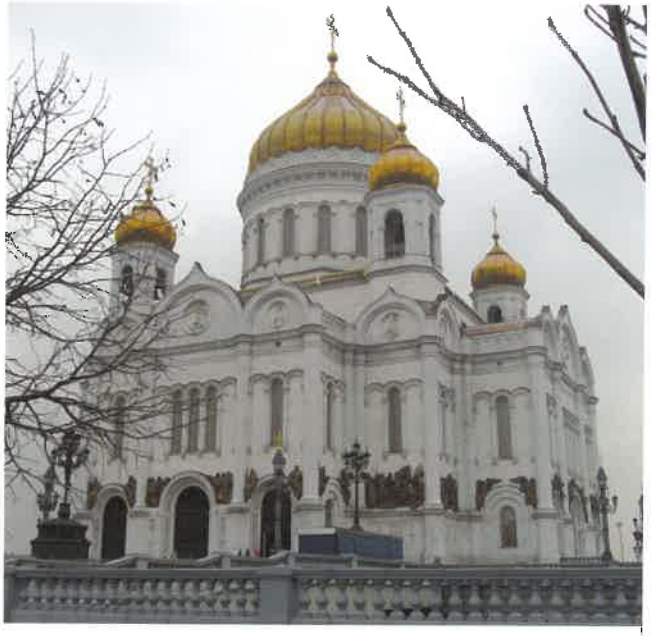
After several years in Western Europe, she left again for Constantinople where she cared for refugees of all sorts. In 1933, she founded the house in Belgrade, and was then elected during the General Chapter as the fourth Superior General of the Congregation. She died before the end of her mandate.

Istanbul, the city where the Latin and Byzantine universes meet, nevertheless remained for a long time a place of reference for the Near Eastern Mission, thanks to the *Institute for Advanced Byzantine Studies (Institut des hautes études byzantines)*. When it was transferred to Bucharest on February 1, 1937 in order to avoid local harassments, it became known as the *French Institute of Byzantine Studies*. Founded by the Assumptionists in Kadikeui (formerly Chalcedon) in 1895, this research center on the Christian Near East was built onto a seminary where Leo XIII wanted to train a Catholic Byzantine clergy and, in so doing, circumvent the Orthodox clergy. Once this original purpose had become obsolete, the institute imposed itself as a scientific authority in terms of the history and of the canonical, theological, and, of course, liturgical traditions of Orthodoxy. Its famous publications (*Echos d'Orient* from 1897 to 1942, *Etudes Byzantines* from 1943 to 1945, and *Revue des Etudes Byzantines* since 1946) continue to serve as international references. The Orthodox Church esteemed this small group of scholarly religious for bringing to light and reconstructing an important part of its heritage. Any Assumptionist received by the Patriarch

of Constantinople, still today, is entitled to a warm expression of his gratitude for the work done by this Institute!

Besides Bishop Louis-Armel Pelâtre, Apostolic Vicar of Istanbul since 1992, there are only two Assumptionists still in Turkey today, both French, with an international community of Oblates. Those responsible for the Congregation, in France as well as in Rome, are seeking new ways to be present in this country, marked by a glorious Christian past and by today's important presence of Islam which Benedict XVI recognized during his visit at the end of 2006 when he said that it played a unique role as a "bridge" between East and West.

But, lest we forget, the ultimate goal assigned to the Near Eastern Mission by Emmanuel d'Alzon remains Moscow. In 1869, he told the Oblates that the outer border of their mission was the Great Wall of China! His sons eventually arrived in **Russia** – where they continue to be present – but at first in Saint Petersburg! It was indeed in the city of the czars that one fine morning Father Liévin Baurain and Brother Evrard Evrard arrived by train, without any other plan than to convert the country!



Moscow, Cathedral of the Savior

They even created a mini Russian-Catholic Church (of the Uniate type) that their successors and especially political events deprived of a future. Other Assumptionist establishments would be scattered over the map of Russia of that time, from Odessa and Kiev all the way to Vilna, and from Makeyevka to Moscow. These last two locations marked the path of a man with an exceptional destiny, Father Pie Neveu, who, after having worked twenty years in the Donetz basin, was secretly ordained apostolic administrator of Moscow and who remained there in that position from 1926 to 1936.

Bishop Pie Neveu
(1877-1946)

Born in Gien (Loiret) in 1877, this son of a laborer became an Assumptionist in 1895, went to study theology in Jerusalem, then taught in Karagach (Turkey). He was ordained a priest in 1905 and the following year went to Saint Petersburg before going to Makeyevka in 1907 to become the pastor of this French mining colony in the Donetz basin, from where he sent reports to the Vatican on the situation of the Church in Russia. In 1926, the Holy See, not having been able to negotiate with the Soviets the reestablishment of the decimated hierarchy, decided to install clandestine bishops in the USSR. Father d'Herbigny, a Jesuit secretly ordained in Berlin by the Nuncio Pacelli, went to Moscow to confer the episcopacy on Father Neveu. This astonishing ordination took place on April 21, 1926 in the church of Saint-Louis des Français, with the doors closed and only two witnesses: Mrs. Alice Ott, the church sacristan, and the Military Attaché at the Italian embassy. On the following October 3rd, Bishop Neveu, celebrating solemnly in the neighboring church of Saints Peter and Paul, revealed his status as bishop and his new position as pastor of Saint Louis. These were heroic times of partial underground as people faced the frenzied antireligious persecution led by Stalin. Thanks to his sense of humor and to the protection of the French Embassy, Bishop Neveu was able to stay there until 1936 when illness forced him to return to France, without Moscow giving him any hope of being able to return, after thirty years of apostolate with the people that he loved so much. He died in 1946 in Paris.

However, the Soviet period did not stop an Assumptionist presence in Moscow. The Roosevelt-Litvinov Agreement of 1933 between the USSR and the United States gave Americans the right to have a chaplain at the embassy for the pastoral ministry of American diplomats and citizens. Father Leopold Braun, the first chaplain to go to Moscow, arrived on March 1, 1934 and served concurrently as American Chaplain and as Bishop Neveu's assistant until the latter's departure in 1936. Consequently, ten American Assumptionists were able to maintain an official Catholic presence behind the iron curtain between 1934 and 1999, except between 1955 and 1959 (See the testimonies of Father Braun, *In Lubianka's Shadow, The Memoirs of an American Priest in Stalin's Moscow, 1934-1945*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, 2006, 352 pages, and of Father Georges Bissonnette, *Moscow My Parish, McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, 1956, 273 pages*. See also *The Catholic Chaplaincy in Moscow, A short History 1934-1999* by Father Robert J. Fortin, Brighton, MA, 2003, 89 pages).

Saint-Louis des Français Church saw the return of a French Assumptionist in 1990, while the red flag was still flying over the Kremlin.

Moscow, Saint-Louis-des-Français Church

Father Bernard Le Léannec, after a year of studies in Zagorsk, bravely settled in, before being joined by other brothers, then by the Oblates. The community has been the source of the first Russian Assumptionist vocations. It should be noted that the Moscow Patriarchate has a very positive opinion of the Assumption family because of its ecumenical openness and its disinterestedness.

Father Judicaël Nicolas (1901-1984)

This religious, born in Morlaix (Finistère) in 1901, was modesty itself. Without seeking it but nevertheless accepting it, he became an illustrious figure because of the suffering he endured. A student in Istanbul, this born-artist profited from a training period at the College in Varna to initiate himself in the art of Byzantine mosaics and to study the Bulgarian language. He trained again in Belgium in the art of making miniatures and of illuminating manuscripts before his ordination in 1930. He then went to teach at the Greek-Catholic secondary school of Beius in Romania. In 1943, taking advantage of the advances of the German army, which included some Romanians, he left for Odessa to retake the church of Saint Peter founded by the Assumptionist Father Auguste Maniglier (1874-1958) to serve the strong minority of Russian and French Catholics. It was there that he was arrested by the GPU (secret police) in April 1945 after the return of the Soviet troops and was imprisoned in the infamous Lubianka in Moscow, located across the street from Saint-Louis des Français church. He was subjected to harsh interrogations and was deported first to Kazakhstan then, from 1947 to 1953, to the gulag of Vorkuta beyond the Arctic Circle to work in the mines. Suffering from the extremes of cold and hunger, to say nothing of the moral torture, and unable to celebrate the Eucharist except rarely by using a bit of cunning, he survived thanks to his artistic talents by drawing official posters. He recounted his story with a bit of humor in "Eleven years in Paradise" (Fayard, 1958). In this book, the word "Gulag" appeared long before it was popularized in the West by Solzhenitsyn. He returned to France in 1954 and died in 1984.

-A Turning Point-

The appointment of Father Gervais Quenard as head of the Congregation in 1923 marked a turning point for the Near Eastern Mission. The new Assumptionist Superior General had been until then the superior of this Mission, having worked in Vilna and Plovdiv and spent time in Moldavia! To be sure, the evolution had been brought on by the political reality. The changes that took place in Turkey and Russia encouraged a redeployment of the Near Eastern Mission in the Balkans. In addition to Bulgaria, it was in **Romania** that the Assumptionists got involved in 1923 after a call from the Greek-Catholic Church of Transylvania (the Oblates arrived in 1925.) They spread themselves widely, adopting here also the Eastern Rite, until the communists came to power in 1948, at which time the Greek-Catholic Church was suppressed, all its property confiscated to the benefit of the Orthodox, and its clergy ordered to join the Orthodox Church. This was an unacceptable demand for the Assumptionists who had no choice but to join the Latin Rite. Some of them did. The other option was to go underground at the risk of losing their freedom. Several were therefore arrested and condemned, at times very severely, to forced labor.

Fr. Gervais Quenard at Vilna

However, these survivors of the persecution had the joy not only of regaining their freedom after the fall of the Ceausescu regime but also of seeing new Romanian vocations for the Assumptionists. With the help of Western religious who went to strengthen the transition of generations, they saw the Congregation reborn in broad daylight, not only in Greek-Catholic Transylvania, but also in Roman Catholic Moldavia (Latin Rite). In close collaboration once again with the Oblate Sisters, they got involved in parish apostolate, and especially in welcoming and forming young people. In the process, they did not forget to involve themselves in social work, notably with orphans.

The Romanian Assumption, equipped today with ten active religious in the country and with as many in formation in the West, as well as with some forty Oblates, welcomes a major project in which the entire Assumptionist congregation is called to participate, namely, the refoundation of a community in Bucharest, in the very same building that had lodged the prestigious Institute of Byzantine Studies between 1937 and 1947, whose goal, henceforth, is to work especially for a reconciliation between the Catholic Churches (of both rites) and the Orthodox Church, in answer to this Assumptionist vocation and to the renewed calls of the papacy.

The Near Eastern Mission remains indebted to the long mandate of Father Quenard as Superior General (1923-1952) for its long but modest presence in **Yugoslavia** during which it rendered a pastoral service to the Catholics of Belgrade from 1925 to 1982. The Oblates were also present in Belgrade where they ran a college from 1925 to 1945.

Mention must also be made of a very brief mission in **Lebanon**, from 1950 to 1958, where the Dutch Assumptionists were responsible for the Syrian-Catholic seminary in Charfet. The present Syrian-Catholic Patriarch, His Beatitude Mar Ignace Pierre Abdel-Ahad, who resides in Beirut, was a student at this seminary, as was his predecessor in Beirut, Cardinal Ignace Moussa Daoud who later became Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Oriental Churches until his retirement in 2007. At the same time, the Dutch Assumptionists created an Institute for the Study of Eastern Christianity in Nimeguen, Holland, entrusting it to the university in 1991.

On the other hand, there is still an Assumptionist community present in **Greece**. This country had already received a famous Assumptionist, Father Louis Petit, who after being in charge of the Institute for Byzantine Studies, was appointed Archbishop of Athens in 1912. He succeeded in obtaining the help of several religious, among them, a Belgian Brother, Jules Pector, a specialist in transcribing ancient manuscripts! After Archbishop Petit's retirement in 1925, two Greek religious set up a residence in 1934 and served as chaplains for communities of teaching-brothers and sisters. They found vocations, always of the Latin Rite – two of them became bishops – and they provided accommodations in Athens for a branch of the Byzantine Institute in order to keep the ecumenical flame burning in this land, which is primarily Orthodox.

Lastly, but chronologically among the first foundations of the Near Eastern Mission: **Jerusalem**! Father d'Alzon had thought about Jerusalem long before his famous interview with Pius IX. He had thought of buying the Cenacle in order to found the Maronite seminary he had dreamed of. But it was in the context of the large pilgrimages the Assumptionists re-launched in 1882 to the tomb of Christ, now relieved of the Ottoman yoke, that they installed themselves in Holy Land. The success of this operation rapidly led them to build a huge hotel, called Notre-Dame de France, next to the Old City whose wall they had pierced, thereby creating a new opening now called New Gate and facilitating their access to the Holy Sepulcher! The Oblates were also there from 1935 to 1957. Many Assumptionists went to study there, including with the Dominicans at *L'Ecole Biblique (The Biblical School)* where, like Father Joseph Germer-Durand, they became known for their archeological work. The Assumption, through its *Bonne Presse* and its pilgrimages, greatly contributed to the Eucharistic Congress held in Jerusalem in 1893, a congress which, in the mind of Leo XIII, was meant to focus the attention of the entire Church on the Eastern Rites. Also to be noted is the considerable work undertaken by Father François Picard following the encyclical *Orientalium dignitatis* of Pope Leo XIII who entrusted the Assumptionists, on May 25, 1898 with the special task of founding the Archconfraternity of Our Lady of the Assumption.

After having sold Notre-Dame de France to the Jewish National Fund in 1970, the Assumptionists had to cede it in 1972 to the Holy See which renamed it Notre Dame of Jerusalem Center. But the Congregation still owns and operates the shrine of Saint Peter in Gallicantu ("at the Cock's Crow") next to Zion Gate and to the Arab quarter in East Jerusalem, where it has been established since 1887 on a site where two peoples and two religions meet face to face! Saint Peter in Gallicantu was completely renovated, modernized, and enlarged by Father Robert Fortin between 1993 and 1999 in order to better accommodate the hundreds of thousands of pilgrims who visit the shrine each year and who now find it an inspiring and prayerful oasis.

Jerusalem, Saint Peter of Cock Crow Sanctuary

-The challenges of renewal -

The end of the 20th century, in the years that marked the centennial of most of the congregations that are part of the mosaic of the Near Eastern Mission, was also a time of upheaval. In the Catholic Church, starting with Vatican II, it was a time of determined and "irrevocable" commitment (John Paul II) to the ecumenical movement. This was perceived as a clear encouragement for the Assumptionists to renew the importance they gave to Christian unity! At the same time, on the political level, the end of the "cold war" between the Soviet block and the West took place, followed by the fall of communism starting in 1989.

The Assumptionists and the Oblates of the Assumption were again able to see a sign of the times. They immediately got involved in the rebirth of their Mission in these countries by sending religious from the West, by encouraging vocations in Romania and Russia as well as in Bulgaria, by broadening the fields of their apostolate, etc. As in the past, their desire was to offer their services to the local Churches in order to help them get back on their feet after the period of the catacombs and especially to accompany young people in their search for points of reference and spiritual guides.

Saints Cyril and Methodius, apostles of the Slavs

At the same time, in Romania and Bulgaria, they linked their clear commitment to ecumenism with the resurrection of the Eastern Catholic Churches which are united to Rome but seen by the Orthodox Churches as a major obstacle on the road to achieving unity. A handful of members of our congregations, in faithfulness to their history, accepted to join this "second lung" of Christianity, without encouraging a proselytizing "uniatism" but allowing the separated Churches to get to know each other through them (cf. box on the various Eastern Rites).

A political challenge also followed from the new configuration of the European Union of 27 countries, whose borders now pass through the Near Eastern Mission. Besides Greece, which was already part of the Union, two countries joined it at the beginning of 2007 (Bulgaria and Romania). But there are still three leading capitals that remain outside of it: Moscow, Istanbul and Jerusalem.

A final challenge, but not the least: the presence of Islam, a religion that, since September 11, 2001, arouses many fears and challenges and poses real questions, especially about what is at stake for our congregations in present-day Turkey.

Eastern Christianity

In the beginning, five mother-Churches spread the Gospel around the Mediterranean, constituting a "pentarchy" of patriarchates: Rome for the Latin world (corresponding to the Western part of the Roman Empire), with primacy over all of Christianity, and four Churches sharing the Eastern part of Roman Empire and falling within the Byzantine orbit: Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem. These sees were declared to be in communion with each other by the Councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381). There is theological diversity and friendliness among them ... but at a distance.

Things changed for the worse when this one Church of Christ met in Councils to clarify the faith. In 431 at **Ephesus**, *Nestorius, bishop of Constantinople, was condemned for having posited "a double personality" in Christ. An* **Assyrian Church** *was created at this time in Mesopotamia. Claiming to have been founded by the Apostle Thomas (reputed to have evangelized Babylonia, then India), and wanting to remain faithful to the Nestorian doctrine, it took its distance from Byzantium and propagated itself as far east as China and India. Before the present war, the Assyrian Church of the East had approximately 300,000 faithful in Iraq and the diaspora.*

The tear in Christ's tunic got larger at the Council of **Chalcedon (451)** *whose doctrine on the two natures (physis, in Greek) in Christ was refuted by Antioch and Alexandria. Called "Monophysites," they were condemned and took advantage of the condemnation to emancipate themselves. Thus were born the Churches called "***non-Chalcedonian,***" or "***pre-Chalcedonian,***" or "***ancient Oriental Churches***":*

- **The Syrian Church** *or "Jacobite Church" (from Jacques Baradat, its founder). It is also called the "Syriac" Church because of its Antiochian heritage. It has less than 300,000 faithful, especially in Syria.*

- **The Coptic Church** *(from the Arabic "Qubt," meaning "Egyptian"). It is under the patronage of Saint Mark and is very linked to the history and culture of Egypt. It has approximately 7 million faithful; their pope is Shenouda III. In modern times, the Ethiopian Church separated itself from the Coptic Church, as did in turn the Eritrean Church from the Ethiopian Church.*

- **The Armenian Church** is the first-ever national church. It was founded in the 4th century by Saint Gregory the Illuminator, hence the name "Gregorian." It joined the group of Monophysites out of concern for cultural and religious independence. It has approximately 6 million faithful; Its Catholicos is Karekin II of Etchmiadzin.

Each of these Churches claims to be "Orthodox," in the sense of having "the true faith." Usage, nevertheless, reserves this claim to the Greek "Chalcedonian" tradition which broke with the West in 1054. This **Byzantine family** ended up with a constellation of Churches of the Greek Rite which recognize the primacy of Constantinople, the "new Rome," whose "ecumenical" patriarch has a primacy of honor ("first among equals") but not of jurisdiction, like in the Church of Rome. Independent from one another ("autocephalous"), these Churches are united by the tradition of the Fathers and the closeness of their rites performed in Greek or in Arabic around the Mediterranean basin, and in the Slavic languages in Eastern Europe. There are:

- Four **mother-churches**: the **patriarchates** of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem;

- Five **more recent patriarchates**: Moscow, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Georgia;

- Five **autocephalous** Churches (archbishoprics): Cyprus, Greece, Poland, Albania, the Czech-Slovak Republic. Also, the Orthodox Church in America whose autocephaly is not universally recognized.

- Several **autonomous** churches, including the Churches of Mount Sinai, Finland, Japan and Macedonia.

- Several churches in the **Diaspora** who broke with their mother-church over politics but who have remained canonical and reunited with the larger Orthodox community, as the Albanian Orthodox Diocese of America, for instance.

For a long time, the theological difference between the Greek Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church was focused on the question of the Filioque. For the Orthodox Churches, the Holy Spirit proceeds only "from the Father," contrary to the Latin creed which, since the 9th century, adds: "and the Son." Today, this obstacle has been overcome. The debate now concerns itself with ecclesiology, with the question of the primacy of the bishop of Rome. It stumbles on "uniatism," on the existence of the Eastern Rite Churches "united" to Rome.

The following **Catholic Eastern Rite communities** were born over the centuries when the heads of Churches, princes or groups of Orthodox (Chalcedonians or not) wished to "unite" with Rome while maintaining their own traditions which include the liturgy, canon law, spirituality and theology. Rome favored this "uniatism" after it failed to Latinize these rites.

Consequently, parallel to the Orthodox communities whose traditions they continue to share, many Eastern **Catholic** Churches emerged with their own canon law":

- In the Assyrian tradition: the **Chaldean Church**. The union came about in 1830 (one million faithful, especially in Iraq). The **Syro-Malabar Church** was born in 1919 (six million especially in India);

- In the Antiochian tradition: the **Syrian-Catholic Church**. The union came about in 1783 (100,000 members in the Near East). The **Syro-Malankara Church** was united in 1930 (300,000 faithful in India);

- In the Alexandrian tradition: the **Coptic Catholic Church** was established by Leo XIII in 1895 (200,000 members in Egypt), and the Ethiopian Catholic Church in 1961 (200,000 faithful);

- The **Armenian Catholic Church** was born in 1740 (300,000 members);

- In the Byzantine tradition: the **Greek-Melkite Church** in the Near East, established in 1724, Arab-speaking (1.3 million faithful), has several **Greek- Catholic Churches** in Eastern Europe (7 million in Ukraine, by the Union of Brest-Litovsk in 1596; 750,000 in **Romania**, by the union realized at the Synod of Alba Iulia in 1698; 10,000 in **Bulgaria**, by its union in 1861, and in Slovakia, Hungary).

- Finally, one Eastern tradition was never separated from Rome: the **Maronite Church**, born in the 4th century (Saint Maron) in Lebanon, where it remained faithful to the doctrine of Chalcedon while at the same time resisting Byzantinization. It was united with Rome during the Crusades (4 million faithful).

Geography lessons

History, therefore, is largely what determined for over 140 years the Assumptionist presence in the Near East. But the present-day geographical distribution of the religious involved in this Mission only makes sense in terms of a constantly renewed desire to work for the coming of the Kingdom of God in conformity with the vocation of the Assumption. The presence of this small religious family in all of these countries today cannot be justified solely on the grounds that it wants to be faithful to this glorious past. Rather, it is **the existence of present-day challenges** that has been the determining factor. These challenges – regardless of whether we are speaking of Christian unity, the confrontation with Islam, or the re-launching of evangelization – were taken into account in the recent decisions of the Assumptionist government (read *boxes* on the last General and Provincial Chapters).

Taking up these challenges is not just the business of the communities and of the religious in the regions involved, but of all of Assumption. This is why, for example, the General Chapter of 2005 asked the entire Congregation to include this priority in its daily prayer and in the formation of the young religious: everyone, in each province, must be sensitized to our Near Eastern tradition, to ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue, and a few religious are to be specifically trained in these fields. Also, the Congregation shall devise ways of informing the religious and provide times for spiritual and intellectual animation, so that the entire Congregation can nourish itself from the treasures of the Near East. Finally, the General Chapter asked that the Assumptionist institutions involved in communications and education engage in ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue, and that each Province evaluate every three years its concrete achievements in these fields!

"A priority that commits all of Assumption"

46. The Eastern European Mission is an essential component of the missionary and ecumenical thrust of the Church. Benedict XVI reaffirmed it as a priority for the Catholic Church. All of our communities live in contact with the Orthodox Church, and even with several Churches, especially in Jerusalem and Istanbul.

47. Our communities which are serving the Catholic Church of the Eastern Rite in Romania and Bulgaria offer us the opportunity to experience another approach to the mystery of God and to 'breathe with the two lungs of the Church,' to use Pope John Paul II's own expression.

50. We want to make this mission a priority for the entire Congregation. If we do not, we will lose an important dimension of our identity.

(Acts of the General Chapter of the Assumptionists, Rome 2005)

The Mission to work in the Near East for the great cause of Church Unity goes to the heart of what we are as a Congregation. It is a heritage that the Church has entrusted to us. Each Oblate is called, wherever she is, to be 'an artisan of unity'.

(Acts of the General Chapter of the Oblates of the Assumption, Paris 2005)

"We must renew our effort"

Directly responsible for the Near Eastern Mission, the Assumptionist Province of France has also put this topic on its agenda. Here are some of its conclusions (July 2005):

30. Our Congregation carries in its genes a concern for ecumenism. Even if promoting Christian unity and inter-religious dialogue is difficult, Assumption has been committed since its birth to this concern which remains a priority. But we must devise a strategy for this mission and strengthen the work of our mission among the local Churches in the Near East, concentrating on unity among all Christians and on being present in the world of Islam, according to the orientations of Vatican II.

33. A priority for the entire Congregation, the Near Eastern Mission must remain just that, especially for the French Province which received this inheritance from the very beginning.

(Official Acts of the Chapter of the Province of France, Valpré 2005.)

The Assumptionist Mission in the Near East is carried out in 2007 in six different countries and seven communities, for a total of 25 religious. The Oblates have 45 sisters in five countries. The reality of this Mission is multi-dimensional in terms of the religious and of the socio-political and cultural contexts of these various countries. What follows is a brief outline based on recent **testimonies** of Assumptionist religious and Oblate sisters who live there.

THE BALKANS

-Bulgaria-

The Assumptionist community in Bulgaria, of the Eastern Rite, consists of five religious in 2007: a Croat, a Frenchman, an Italian, and two Bulgarians. It has charge of three parishes – Ascension parish in Plovdiv, the second largest city in the country, the parish in Kuklen, a suburb of Plovdiv, and the parish of Pokrovan, near the border with Greece and Turkey – all of them of the Byzantine Rite. These religious, who are bi-ritual, also offer pastoral services to St. Joseph church, of the Latin Rite, and to the Missionaries of Charity in Plovdiv. A young volunteer, a Mexican of Japanese origin, came to replace a French layman who returned to France after serving two years as a Volunteer Assumptionist layman *(cf. box)*. A young Bulgarian entered the French novitiate in September 2006 and another is living with the Plovdiv community during his postulancy.

The world of youth is a constant preoccupation of the Assumptionists in Bulgaria and of the Oblates who help them in their pastoral ministry while, at the same time, animating a center of their own for young girls. One religious teaches at the neighboring university which, until the communists came to power, was the prestigious Assumptionist College of Saint Augustine.

The Plovdiv community has also launched a website about the Assumptionist Near Eastern Mission (www.assomptionorient.Altervista.org). Its goal is to make known not only the Eastern spirituality and the life of these Churches to Christians in the West, but also the Latin Church to Christians in the Near East so that they too can breathe with their two lungs!

Saint Augustine college at Plovdiv

"My journey to the Near Eastern Mission"

"I was born in the former Yugoslavia, in a Catholic family but in a milieu that was almost completely Orthodox. From my youth, I felt this intolerance between the Latin and Eastern traditions. Besides, it was linked to nationality: a Serb was automatically Orthodox and a Croat, Catholic. In catechism classes, they explained to us that the Catholic and Orthodox faiths are almost the same. But we had to avoid entering an Orthodox church; this was considered almost a sin. And even if we entered and if there were people inside, we were not to make the sign of the cross. You could do so only if there were no people around.

In this context, as we searched for everything that separated us from the others, we could only esteem ourselves better than them and more modern. We looked at the others from on high, with disdain, and we saw them as people from the past. The only solution for them was to join the Roman Catholic Church. And even then, those who joined the Roman Church as "Uniates" were looked upon with scorn, even by the Latin Catholics.

In France, where I began my religious life, the road toward the Near Eastern Mission was not very precise. People spoke to me of Assumptionists who translated the works of the Greek Fathers; it was something very important in order to learn about the other. But for me, this remained on the intellectual level, a knowledge without any consequences for my spiritual life. Spiritually, I stayed locked in my Latin tradition.

Then in 1955, I was named to the Assumptionist community in Plovdiv that lives and works in the Eastern tradition. This is where my journey began more concretely and distinctly toward the Near Eastern Mission. Overnight, I fell into a spiritual environment which, though theologically close to me, was in practice far from me. I had to change my ideas, my opinions, and my point of view. And this was not very easy. I had to get used to the new liturgy. A priest does not "say Mass" but "celebrates the Divine Liturgy." And this already made me stop and think. I had to get used to icons, make many signs of the cross with three fingers, and many other things.

But behind all of this there was a spirituality that was quite removed from me. The liturgical vestments are solemn; it takes time to vest. For each piece of liturgical vesture, there is a prayer. One must take time to prepare the "anaphora" (Eucharistic prayer in the Eastern Rite), placing the pieces of bread in a very precise manner. During the liturgy, only the small "royal door" is left open. It is also astonishing to see this iconostasis that separates the celebrants from the people. And the practice of all the other sacraments can also seem

very strange to us. But with the help of our brother Assumptionist, Fr. Gorazde Kourtev, from an Orthodox family, I was able to slowly adapt myself.

On this journey toward the Near Eastern Mission, I understood that one can enter an Eastern church and visit the inside of the building, all the while remaining on the outside. In order to really enter an Eastern church, one must have an open mind. This means that we must let its spirituality penetrate our mind. This opened my eyes about many things concerning our two traditions. Thus, through the celebration of the Mass and the Divine Liturgy, I noticed that the Latin tradition stresses the human dimension while the Eastern tradition stresses the divine aspect. What is strange is that after 50 or 60 years of living under the atheistic communist regime, one rarely meets someone who claims to be an atheist. The everyday language always refers to God: God is great, God will help, God will decide, etc. How is this possible? As I thought about this, it occurred to me that atheism arose from a philosophy of the Latin tradition, as well as communism, and these ideas were applied in countries of the Eastern tradition. It is interesting to note that in the Latin tradition, one "proves" the existence of God; there are proofs that he exists. But in the Eastern tradition, this is unthinkable. One doesn't need proofs of God's existence: God is, and that is all."

Fr. Petar Ljubas, Plovdiv (Bulgaria)

-Romania -

Is it a providential sign? In 2006, the building that formerly housed the glorious French Institute of Byzantine Studies on Christian Tell Street in Bucharest and that was confiscated by the dictatorship in the 1950s has been returned to the Church. Very shortly, therefore, the Assumptionists should be able to send new personnel to this country. Their presence in the Romanian capital would complement their already significant presence in the two other large regions of this country: Transylvania, where they are part of the Greek-Catholic Church (of the Eastern Rite) and Moldavia, where they are of the Latin Rite (Roman-Catholic Church).

The Margineni community, near Bacau (Moldavia), is young and very promising with three religious (one Italian and two Romanians). It operates a center for young people in vocational discernment and does youth ministry with the students at the local high schools and orphanages. The religious also render pastoral services (Masses and confessions) to help the parish priests. Collaboration with the Oblate Sisters is active, notably with orphans, in trying to find homes outside of the institution for the oldest among them.

As for the community in Blaj (Transylvania), it comprises three religious (all Romanians) who are involved especially in youth ministry and in the animation of a pilgrimage. It shares the painful fate of the Greek-Catholic Church, ever confronted with the question of the restitution of its places of worship: thus, the church of Casa Domnului, which was turned over to the Or-

thodox in 1948, has not yet been returned... For the time being, the Assumptionists are the only male community in the diocese. This presence is appreciated because of the model of apostolic life that it represents, a very different model from Orthodox monasticism. However, celibacy presents a difficulty for young men who have before their eyes a married Catholic clergy. As for the ecumenical dialogue, it remains a real challenge, because of the unbending positions of the local churches!

Following up on the General Chapter of 2005 which rated the Near Eastern Mission as a priority, Fr. Richard Lamoureux, Superior General, wrote to the Congregation a letter entitled *"In One Body"* in which he talks about this Mission. In it, among other things, he appealed to all the Assumptionists who might be able to contribute to the refoundation of a community in Bucharest, calling for a return to the intellectual tradition of the Assumptionists in the Near East, a tradition which began with the foundation of *Echos d'Orient*. (At the present time, thought is being given to reinstalling in Bucharest a Byzantine library at the university level). He also suggested that this is an occasion for us to further commit ourselves to the movement for Christian unity, with the help of one or another of the young Romanians currently in formation, and possibly with that of one or two Oblates.

> Testimony

"Our mission: to help bring about communion in the Church"

"When it was suggested that I come to Romania, I asked: why should we go back to the Near East? What would be our goal? I was told that my question made no sense, that this is the land where the faith of our Assumptionist priests was put to the test, land that could produce vocations... I have now been in Romania for ten years, and this question has never left me: why return to the land of our Fathers?

In order to understand the reasons for our presence, I read The Mission of the Assumption in the Near East 1862-1924, *published in the first months of 1925. The reasons were clear: to work in the important apostolate of bringing the East back to the One Catholic Church; 'to lift the veil of the schism that hides the Church from our separated brothers' (Fr. Quenard). To bring the Orthodox back to Rome was the goal of this Mission. There were many different works, but only one goal. It was a way of thinking based on a precise concept of the Church – the Roman Catholic Church 'is' the body of Christ – according to which there can be no ecclesial realities outside the Catholic Church (cf. Pius XII, Mystici Corporis, 1943). With such an idea of the Church, the consequences were clear: bring the lost sheep back into the fold of Rome. The Assumptionists could not do otherwise.*

Today, the thinking has changed. We define the Church as the people of God journeying as pilgrims. Outside the Catholic structures, there are ecclesial realities and even, as in the case of the Eastern Churches, authentic Churches of Christ. Ecumenism and mission are twin concepts: in the ecumenical movement, the Church takes part in an exchange of gifts with the separated Churches (cf. Ut unum sint, 28; 57). Even if the Catholic Church continues to say that it is the authentic Church of Christ, having alone the fullness of the means to salvation, it sees all of this in a dialectical way, by taking the other Churches into account and by renouncing triumphalism.

If the way of understanding the Church has changed, so has the mission. In the new perspective, the goal of ecumenism can no longer be a return of the others to the Catholic Church. It can be attained only through the work of the Holy Spirit and the conversion of everyone to Christ. The basic idea of Vatican II is summarized in the word communio, which defines the deepest mystery of the Church, icon of the Trinity. Communio does not mean uniformity but unity in diversity and diversity in unity. Inside the only Church, there is room for a diversity of mentalities, customs, rites, rules, theologies, and spiritualities.

Communio means bringing to fruition all the gifts that the individual Churches carry within themselves.

Here then is our Mission: to work for the catholicity (universality) of the Church, to work so that all the gifts of the Holy Spirit which are present in the individual Churches may be brought to fruition. We can therefore summarize the goal of the Assumptionist Mission in the Near East in two words: communio Ecclesiae, *that is to say, we want to help bring about communion in the Church.*

Father Cleopa, staretz of the Orthodox monastery in Sihastria (Piatra Neamt), has stated: 'One day someone asked a monk in the forest: The end of the world, when will it come? The holy man answered: When there will no longer be a path between man and his neighbor! As long as men live behind fences, they will close their hearts to each other, they will forget love, mutual service, in short, communion; at that point, life will have no meaning.'"

Fr. Celeste Pianezze, Margineni (Romania)

-Russia-

Saint-Louis des Français parish remains the throbbing heart of the Assumptionist presence in Moscow, continuing a long and glorious history! Three religious, two French and one Russian, share the pastoral ministry. Their pastoral service to the personnel of the various embassies and of the many foreign businesses in the Russian capital touches many foreigners, while nevertheless leaving the door wide open to welcoming not only Russian Catholics but also foreign communities who ask to celebrate in their own language. Sunday Masses are celebrated in Latin and French, but also in English and Vietnamese. With the help of the Oblate Sisters, the Assumptionists are also in charge of the catechetical instruction given to the students of the French secondary school (lycée), which is now located next to the church in the quarters of the former parish schools (there were 150 children enrolled at the beginning of the 2006 school year). Finally, a dacha, in the suburbs of Moscow, makes it possible to organize meetings for young people during the school year and camps during the summer vacation.

There is obviously a concern for ecumenism, with constant attention given to the Orthodox Church in Russia and, as much as possible, to contacts with its leaders. The community and the parish are also in contact with various countries, notably China and Vietnam, depending on the length of time spent in Moscow by their countrymen, some of whom come in contact with religious life through the Assumptionists.

Moscow, Saint-Louis-des-Français Church

> Testimony

"Brother Pilgrim"

"On the occasion of the feast of All Saints, we celebrated the memory of Saint Sergius of Radonezh who died 600 years ago. The celebration allowed us see that relations between the Christian West and Russia are better than people generally think. And these ties have often manifested themselves through prayer and devotion to the saints who are common to both the West and Russia. Saint Clement and Saint Nicholas, Saint Martin and Saints Cyril and Methodius, the apostles to the Slavs, are 'the links that attach the daughter-Church of Russia to the universal mother-Church.' Saint Sergius, the Father of northern monasticism, has been added to this great lineage. Through these examples, Divine Providence shows each of us the road to be followed. When I arrived in Russia, Saint Sergius was my first guide and spiritual master. In October 1989, I was invited by the Patriarch of Moscow to live at the Trinity-Saint Sergius Lavra (Monastery) during a whole year. I was received in Russia as a pilgrim. Near the tomb of Saint Sergius, I prayed every morning for a year, and there, I came to know, understand, and love the Russian language, the Russian people, and Russia. 'In order to understand Russia, you must understand the Lavra,' said the theologian Paul Florensky. This was the experience

I was encouraged to make before continuing the pilgrimage of my life that led me to Moscow. Thanking the Orthodox Church for having received me as a pilgrim brother, I wish to thank Saint Sergius and ask him to protect the remainder of my pilgrimage and of my ministry in the service of the Church in this land of Russia which is the land of Christ."

Fr. Bernard Le Léannec (Moscow), All Saints 1992

> Testimony

"Workers for Unity"

"Fr. d'Alzon said to Fr. Galabert in 1876: 'Sooner or later, Russia will open its doors to us...' In 1994, Russia did open its doors to us, which allowed us to found a new community of Missionary Oblate Sisters of the Assumption, in keeping with the desire of Fr. d'Alzon who wanted us to be 'Workers for Unity.' Since that time, we have been present in the heart of Moscow at the Saint-Louis des Français Parish, where we work with our Assumptionist brothers.

In addition to our presence in the parish (with its French, English, and Vietnamese communities) and to the catechetical instruction we give to 150 children from the French secondary school, the animation of celebrations, the welcoming of groups, the religious articles and book shop, and our visits to the sick give us the occasion to be in contact with the Russian people."

Sr. Maria Zediu and Sr. Regina Pruteanu (Moscow)

With the Oblate community of Moscow

-Turkey-

Located between Europe and Asia, this country is in a privileged position to help us understand the important political and religious issues of today. The Assumptionist presence there is very modest, though it involves more than the pastoral service of the local Latin minority. Two French religious live in Istanbul and exercise an intellectual and ecumenical apostolate, which includes learning about Islam and even dialoguing with Muslims. The community is in charge of the Kadikeui parish (formerly Chalcedon), the only Latin church on the Asiatic shore of the Bosphorus where a Levantine Christian minority rubs shoulders with expatriated Catholics who have come for commercial or educational reasons. Moreover, this church is put at the disposal of the local Syrian-Orthodox community.

The community's project is found in a recommendation of the last General Chapter of the Assumptionists: *"Istanbul, a place so important for the Church and a cosmopolitan city, is actually the only place where we are present in a Muslim country. It is essential that we rethink the manner in which we are present there in order to give that presence new meaning and to assure its future in terms of the new realities. While this work is taking place, it is important that we consolidate our links with this community, in particular by encouraging pilgrimages, retreats and sessions in this place so privileged from the point of view of inter-religious and intercultural realities."* Bishop Louis-Armel Pelâtre, Apostolic Vicar of Istanbul since 1992, is also an Assumptionist religious.

> Testimony

"Responding to the signs of the times"

"Turkey is an immense field which needs to be evangelized but which is not very open to it... As an Oblate of the Assumption, I think that the Spirit is calling the Church of our time to work for the unity of the Churches and for reconciliation among the believers of the various religions.

The service of the parish is what allows us to be present in Turkey, and thus also to work toward a broader ecumenical and inter-religious communion.

This is part of our heritage. I am sure that Assumption will receive as much from it as it gives."

Sr. Monica Buhalea (Istanbul)

-greece-

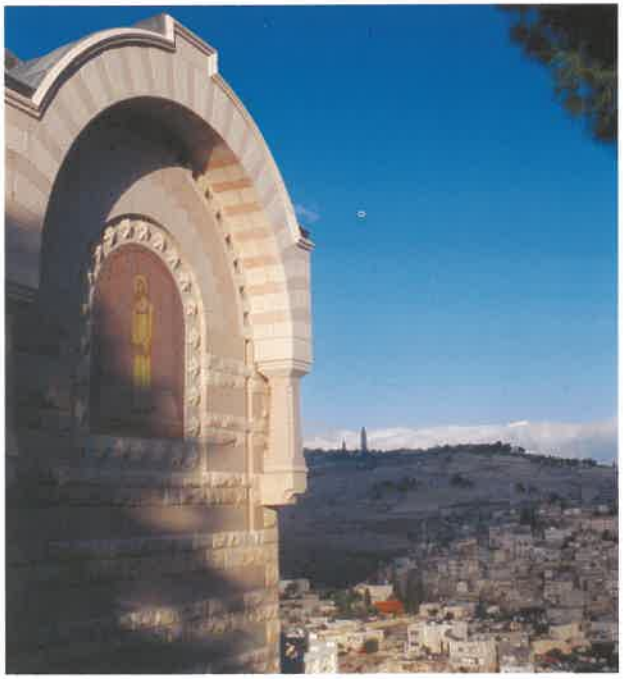
In Greece, a neighboring country, there are four religious in the community: three Greeks (including Archbishop Antoine Varthalitis, archbishop emeritus of Corfou), and an American. Together, they staff the parish of Saint Theresa in Athens and take a more and more active role in a new pastoral ministry designed to welcome Catholic immigrants, especially Filipinos and Africans. They are concerned about developing a constructive dialogue with the Orthodox and, at the same time, a vocation ministry which is especially difficult because Catholics are a very small minority: the country is more than 90% Orthodox with only 300,000 Catholics, only 50,000 of whom are native Greeks! According to certain projections, the immigrant population could increase tenfold over the next ten years.

This was the context which awaited the Oblates of the Assumption upon their arrival in the Greek capital, the only place where the Assumptionists were present in the Near East but where the Sisters had not been present until that time.

-Jerusalem-

For a long time, the religious living in Jerusalem benefited from a special status in the Congregation, which was something that could isolate them. But to this historical complexity has been added a great political instability that requires in turn a very special solicitude on the part of all the religious, as the Provincial Chapter of the Assumptionists of France stated in 2005: *"Taking into account the difficult situation in which our brothers live in Jerusalem, it is important to strengthen our ties with them, including our affective ones."*

Helped also by the Oblate Sisters, the community at Saint Peter in Gallicantu comprises four members (three French and one British) and pursues various activities: welcoming groups of pilgrims, exegetical research and biblical courses, preaching of retreats, collaboration with the Latin Patriarchate and with the many Churches in Holy Land, and serving as ecclesiastical advisor to the General Consul of France regarding matters affecting the religious communities and their apostolates in Jerusalem and the Palestinian Territories.



Jerusalem, Saint Peter of Cock Crow Sanctuary

The location of the shrine, just above the Arab village of Silwan and just below the top of Jewish Mount Sion, and very close to the Old City, places the Assumptionists in the middle of all the tensions. For the Arabs, the community is part of East Jerusalem; for the Israelis, it is one of the Christian shrines covered by the Fundamental Agreement between the State of Israel and the Holy See. These are two truths that are not mutually exclusive, but that represent an immense challenge when combined together!

The presence of the Oblates of the Assumption

"Successive wars and communism had almost wiped out the presence of the Oblates of the Assumption in the Near Eastern Mission, even though the Mission had been at the origin of our foundation.

During the War of 1914, there were around 250 sisters, 120 of them from Western Europe, and 130 native-born from Armenia, Greece, Romania, Turkey, and Yugoslavia, etc.

In 1990, we were still present in Istanbul (Kadikeui) and clandestinely in Bucharest.

As soon as it was possible after the fall of communism, thanks mostly to Romanian vocations, we were able to extend our apostolate in Romania and, as in the past, answer the call of our Assumptionist brothers to assist them in Plovdiv, Moscow, Jerusalem and Athens. To be sure, there is no longer question of operating boarding schools, as we did formerly in Belgrade, Haïdar-Pacha, Kum Kapu and Varna, or of being in charge of hospitals, as we were in Bucharest and Adrianople! That, however, was what our former students were hoping for, praising the education they had received... Our situation is much more humble: to help the people rebuild in the context of the freedom they now enjoy in a so-called democracy; to help the Church's rebirth, regardless of rite (Latin or Byzantine), without proselytizing and respecting the Orthodox Church; and to work with our Assumptionist brothers with the same goal and complementarity, as we did when we were first founded."

Sister Claire Rabitz, Superior General of the Oblates of the Assumption.

> Testimony

"Sisters and Brothers are well placed to establish bonds of unity!"

"Seeking unity between Christians in a spirit of love and truth is a fundamental component of a more incisive evangelization," wrote John Paul II in his apostolic letter for the 3rd centennial of the Union of the Greek-Catholic Church with Rome (May 7, 2000). In this sense, consecrated life has a lot of work to do! And we, as Assumption sisters and brothers, are well placed to continue spinning a web of relations and communion with Orthodox nuns and monks. The testimony of a consecrated life of fraternity, prayer, openness, and joie de vivre touches people more than speeches. And this, for two reasons. First, our simple and fraternal approaches do not commit the hierarchy officially. Then, patiently and progressively, they can change mentalities, the way the other is perceived (the image of the Catholic Church is not necessarily very positive!) because we must not forget that Orthodox bishops are chosen from among the monks. We must constantly return to and deepen our understanding of the Trinity and explore together the common treasure of the patristic, liturgical, and iconographic traditions. At the same time, by the very nature of our communities and their apostolic involvements, we rub shoulders with many Orthodox with whom we have very cordial relations of friendship and collaboration. In sharing the problems of daily life, they appreciate our openness toward people in general and our family spirit.

We can be active interlocutors, a ferment of communion in the local Church, by taking small steps together, being open to each other, exchanging our experiences, forgiving the other, and dialoguing. It is up to us to become more and more men and women of communion with God, among ourselves, and in the Church. So why not seek to involve, in this movement toward reunion, other religious congregations whose charism also includes working for Unity?"

Sr. Felicia Ghiorghies (Romania)

We're recruiting!

"Assumption Volunteers"

Concerned about strengthening the alliance between religious and laity, the Assumptionist family has recently enriched itself of an unprecedented component: the "Assumption Volunteers" who dedicate a period of their life to sharing in the apostolate of a community, in France or elsewhere. In this connection, two programs are suggested:

- The "Young Assumption Volunteers" (YAV), for young people ages 18 to 30 who wish to devote a minimum of four months – ideally, one year – of their life as a volunteer. Because the spiritual component of this program is important, it addresses itself to believers seeking to live a faith experience.

- The "Assumption Lay Volunteers" (ALV), for everyone, men and women, celibates, couples or families, without any age limit (but at least 18 years old). The duration of this volunteer service can be of several weeks or up to two years.

Contact: Assumption Volunteer Programs, 79 Denfert-Rochereau Avenue, F-75014 Paris, France (information on the website HYPERLINK «http://www.assumption.org/» www.assumption.org). Also: Fr. John L. Franck, Emmanuel House, 512 Salisbury Street, Worcester, MA 01609-1326, USA: jlfranck@aol.com

Two voices but only one priority: unity!

With the Higumen of Rila Monastery in Bulgaria.

Accordingly, all Catholics – and all Assumptionists – are not of the Latin Rite! This plurality must nourish the soul of each Christian so that the whole Church – and all of Assumption – may breathe deeply with these two lungs. This double movement, from East to the West and from West to the East, has a beautiful name: "an exchange of gifts."

Therefore, in the context of the globalization that is taking place at the present time, the permanence of such a Mission constitutes, now more than ever, an *invitation* to the entire Assumption family:

• It involves a **basic option** on the part of our Congregations, an option recently and solemnly validated as such;

• It offers our Congregations an **opportunity** to express its charism through the very diverse commitments and locations of its men and women religious and laypersons;

• And it remains a **gamble**: that of keeping all of Assumption in touch with these realities and with this apostolate of breathing "with both lungs" in the midst of the Christian East, so that each person, wherever he/or she lives in the Church and in the world, can become an artisan of communion!

"A call to a cause"

"While we have to be attentive to today's realities and very specifically to be solicitous for our brothers and sisters hard at work in various apostolates in the East, it is crucial that we rekindle some of the fire that led Father d'Alzon to commit his meager resources to a mission about which he knew and understood very little.

The "call" seems clear. It comes from the Second Vatican Council and more recently from Pope John Paul II and now Pope Benedict XVI. It comes too from the Ecumenical Patriarch himself. And the call comes from the fact that we, as congregations, were founded in good part for this mission. With a century and a half of experience, we are recognized in the Church, both East and West, as "experts" in the field. It is not false pride to say that few congregations have a richer theological and pastoral experience in the domain of Catholic-Orthodox affairs...

This is not a call to a place, the East and Near East, but to a cause: the hope expressed by Jesus in the Cenacle (see John 21), the ecumenical cause, the 'full and visible unity of all Christ's followers' (as Pope Benedict puts it), and particularly with regard to the Church of the East."

Fr. Richard Lamoureux, Superior General, letter *In One Body on the Near Eastern Mission* (2007)

> Testimony

"To open oneself to other Christians is also to open one's self to God"

"Having been brought up in France in the Latin tradition, I had the grace of being called to serve the Church in Bulgaria in the Byzantine tradition. To be sure, as with everyone of the Latin Rite who discovers the Byzantine Rite, what struck me at first were the differences. But I always had the inner conviction that the two traditions confessed the same Christ, that they both praised the same God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and that it was truly the same Christian faith. This allowed me to accept these differences without any negative a priori, but rather with kindness and as a possible enrichment.

It is this same state of mind that I would like to share with Christians of the Latin Rite in order to help them sense the richness of the Eastern Christian tradition and to encourage them to pursue its discovery even further. Is not openness to this other great Christian tradition a sign of openness to the mystery of God who transcends all traditions and, at the same time, a good way to avoid falling into the ever-present temptation of diminishing the importance of this divine mystery?"

Fr. Daniel Gillier, Plovdiv (Bulgaria)

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To help deepen one's understanding of the Eastern Churches

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