

Pope Pius XI, who himself had ordained Archbishop Sokolski, asked the founder of the Assumptionists, Father Emmanuel d'Alzon, to send some religious to Bulgaria to especially help those Bulgarian Orthodox who wished to enter the Catholic Church. These converts which were called "Uniates", a term may sound pejorative today. Before the ecumenical movement of the 20th century, ecumenism from the Catholic point of view was seen as a return to Rome and not as a communion of sister churches as Vatican II acknowledged.



Father Victorin Gallabert, A.A. (1830-1885)

Father Victorin Galabert, a medical doctor and a doctor in Canon Law, became the founder of the Assumptionist mission in Bulgaria, which was then known as the "Mission in the East". To help his priests, Fr. d'Alzon founded a congregation of sisters, "the Oblates of the Assumption", who established schools at Sofia, Yambol, Varna and Sliven. In 1864, the Assumptionists had started a grammar school, St. Andrew's, at Philippopoli (Plovdiv) while awaiting to found St. Augustine College in 1884, which would rapidly become one of the most prestigious schools in the Balkans, until the Communists closed it in 1948.

Re-inforced presence of the Assumptionists

The Assumptionists accepted responsibility for several parishes with both Latin and Byzantine rites within each. Several Assumptionists were ordained in the Byzantine rite. They had established three seminaries, at Adrianopolis, at Kum Kapu (European bank of Istanbul) and Kadikoy (Asian bank of Istanbul). We must remember that at that time, Bulgaria was not independent, but under Turkish domination. The Assumptionists eventually founded several residences in Turkey, missions in Rumania, Greece, Russia, Yugoslavia and Palestine. But Bulgaria was the start of this considerable Assumptionist presence in the Near East. Direct apostolate was complemented by an intellectual apostolate with the creation at Kadikoy, in 1897, of "Edios d'Orient", the journal of the Center for Byzantine Studies, by Bishop Louis Petit, future Latin Archbishop of Athens. In Bulgaria itself, at the end of World War II, twenty Bulgarian Assumptionists exercised their apostolate at the Plovdiv College and various parishes. In 1948, the Communists expelled all non-Bulgarian religious, including non-Bulgarian Assumptionists. Everything was thus in place for the horror that would befall the Catholic minority of the country.

