

The interview with Fr. Donald Espinosa, A.A. on the mission of the Assumptionist Center.

This month, the Augustinians of the Assumption released a newsletter about their unique house of formation, where seminarians of their congregation live together in community with lay students at the Boston College School of Theology and Ministry.

I spoke with Assumptionist Fr. Donald Espinosa, one of the founders of the house, about this frontier in lay and clerical formation. Here are some thoughts gleaned from our conversation.

- Father Donald, could you share a bit about your own background?

Fr. Donald Espinosa: My mother used to tell me about Father Mollard, the pastor, who would make sure he visited every home regularly. It seemed perfectly normal to everyone. He'd stop people and say, "I'm going to your house tonight," and they'd go home and make a special meal and clean the house and shine up the kids, and Father would come in and eat with them, get everyone in front of him, give them a blessing, and then take the donation envelope. Everyone had their place -- but there was something reassuring about that. You didn't exactly feel embraced by the church, but you felt like you belonged to something, and you knew who you were.

Part of my desire to become a priest was wanting to play a significant role in that church. I entered the Assumptionists in 1962, headed off to Europe for philosophy and theology in '63,

and found that Europe was a whole other world, a whole other church. It was bubbling with Vatican II energy -- bubbling with, basically, a renewing ecclesiology.

And I began to believe my responsibility was not to oversee people, but somehow to walk with people. Now, even in a post-Vatican II church, that has not always been easy for lots of reasons, not the least of which is that people over the centuries have grown up with a self-understanding that says, "My job is to go to church for an hour on Sunday and put a couple dollars in the basket." As pastor, I would say to people in our parish all those wonderful lines about "This is your church," but really understanding what that meant was a slow process for all of us.

Growing up is difficult. But with God's help, we're moving in the right direction.

- What was the initial impetus for creating a mixed lay-religious community?

When we bought this house many years ago, it was primarily to be used as an administrative headquarters and formation house. But more recently, we realized we weren't using this big house effectively. Was there some way to open it up to be of some kind of apostolic presence in the church in Boston?

Our founder, Emmanuel d'Alzon , looked at his turbulent world and at his church and concluded that people aren't really so bad, but they don't have the kind of formation they need. That's why he committed himself to education, in whatever form it took.

His vision of the church was in many ways really prophetic. True, he'd write letters from Rome about how wonderful it was to see all these buildings and bishops and cardinals -- but he also recognized that the church couldn't function without its people. So right from the beginning, his first school was run by priests and brothers and laypeople, together.

What was underlying the vision here in Boston was precisely that collaborative piece, about recognizing and strengthening the relationship with the lay church.

The Assumptionists have a local mission statement --

"Centered in Jesus Christ, responsive to the needs of the time, we the Assumptionists in the United States are men of prayer and study living in fraternal community." But what a wonderful definition of the church itself: "people of prayer and study living in fraternal community."

So we said, we've got a place where we try to live this; let's open our doors, open our lives, open ourselves, to sharing that -- sharing the journey, sharing the search, in a place where together, we can learn what it means to be church. And not for me to tell you, but for us to learn what that means, together.

One of the images from the council is very powerful for me: the church as the pilgrim people of God. It's the people who walked in the desert for 40 years, made mistakes, yet were also successful, and through all of that journeying, God was forming them into his people.

The older I get, the more I realize how important it is -- and how difficult -- to integrate the parts of our lives. People are trying to figure out how to put the pieces together, whether it's in relationships or physically or in terms of prayer, study, philosophical notions. I think the center is a place where people are doing that, and to some extent are sharing that with one another.

- Did you face any skepticism along the way?

There were some concerns. For example, some people were convinced the religious should live on one floor and the residents should live on another floor, because you're never going to be able to maintain your identity as a religious community if you allow yourselves to be mingled. And right from the start, we said, we don't want to do that. We don't want to have a special cloister for ourselves. We want literally to open our doors and open our lives, to share the same space, the same table, the same chapel. It's not our little life over here; it's our effort within a fraternal community to live and pray and study and try to discover God.

- How do you think we are doing as a collaborative church today?

The media often point out what's not working, and God knows there's plenty of that. But I think we need to acknowledge when something good is happening, too. We're not going to move in a straight or even consistent line, and that's just who we are as human beings. But what happens is, we take two steps forward and one backward, and hopefully it's not two or three backward!

We don't have a map, and somehow or other, we feel lost very easily. And so I think we have to be willing to live with feeling lost. If we don't do this in the context of prayer, it's not going to happen, and the guiding image is Jesus inviting Peter out on the water. That's where he's inviting us, out on the water. And we believe that we can trust him.

By Nicholas Collura

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