

August 3, 2016 Worcester (MA)

Barely three months after his ordination, the future founder of the Assumptionists, Emmanuel d'Alzon, wrote to one of his best friends this remarkable passage:

"The most intimate thought of my soul is that the world needs to be penetrated through and through by a Christian idea; otherwise it will fall apart. And the world will not receive this idea but from men who will be taken up with it before all else in order to proclaim it in every form that it might assume.… we need to teach it and to do so in words it can understand." (Letter to Alphonse de Vigniamont, 28 March 1835)

"Penetrating the world through and through with a Christian idea" became the passion of his life. The young d'Alzon sensed in his post-Revolutionary France that the forces of religious ignorance and indifference were already afoot, not to mention the germs of outright unbelief, forces that would only sink deeper roots and flourish until our own day. He was convinced that ideas governed the world, whether good or bad, and so came to the conclusion early in life that education, Christian education, was essential for the survival of the world. Without a Christian idea the world would fall apart.

Given this world-view, it is not surprising that education would head the list of apostolic works that would characterize the two congregations that he would eventually found, the Augustinians of the Assumption in 1845 and the Oblate Missionary Sisters of the Assumption in 1865. And it is not surprising that educators in the schools founded by these two congregations would want to plumb the depths of his thinking to serve as the foundation of their own apostolic efforts in the 21st century, in worlds and times far removed from his own, even if his basic intuitions have proven to be eerily on target.

So it was that this past July (17-27) nearly 70 educators and staff members from around the world gathered at Assumption College in Worcester Massachusetts (USA) to identify the fundamental elements of an education rooted in the vision of Fr. Emmanuel d'Alzon. Participants at the congress, entitled "Education at Assumption: From 19th Century France to Today's Globalized World," came from some 20 Assumptionist high schools and universities on four continents, from Chile to Belgium, from the United States to Madagascar, from France to Argentina, from Colombia to Kenya.

Based on personal testimonies of participants, on a close reading of some of Fr. d'Alzon's central texts on education, and on several formal presentations by experts on his work in this area, Congress participants were able to identify eight fundamental elements of an Assumption education today: from the centrality of Jesus Christ in the quest to become truly human and free individuals to the conviction that for teachers at Assumption, as d'Alzon said, "It is not enough to teach; we must educate," that is to say, teachers must engage in the formation of the whole person, body, mind, spirit, and soul.

As a result of this first-ever Assumptionist international congress, the two sponsoring congregations were able to reignite d'Alzon's enthusiasm for education, to form Assumption educators worldwide, and to foresee follow-up efforts that will assure that d'Alzon's dream that the world be penetrated through and through with a Christian idea remain at the heart of their apostolic endeavors.

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