

By: Bro. Ryan Carlsen, AA

With all the debate happening right now concerning the proper interpretation of Amoris Laetitia, I wondered: would Fr. d'Alzon, founder of the Assumptionists, take sides in this debate? For anyone wanting to learn more about the Assumptionists, I thought a brief reflection on the founder's views might be useful since the charism of the congregation comes from the Holy Spirit through the founder. A possible answer to the question of whether he would take sides came to me after reading about Steven Spielberg's upcoming movie The Kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara.

The Edgardo Mortara case was a big story in 19th-century Europe. Edgardo was born into a Jewish family in Bologna, Italy, the sixth of eight children. A severe illness in early childhood left him on the brink of death. At that point the family's Catholic maid secretly baptized the boy. The Church's teaching at that time, as it is today, was that no child could be baptized without parental consent and a commitment to raise the child as a Catholic. However, if death was near, this kind of baptism was permitted because it cleansed and saved the soul, preparing it for heaven.

A few years after Edgardo's baptism a priest in Bologna learned that a Jewish child in the city had been baptized. If so, that would make the Jewish child a Christian and a Catholic, and the Church held that a Christian child could not be raised in a non-Christian family. So the Holy

Office decided to forcibly remove Edgardo from his home. They could do this because of the Church's temporal power at that time. This devastated the boy's parents and caused an international uproar. Pope Pius IX did not think it right to return the child to his family given baptism's great significance, that it creates a sacramental bond to the Body of Christ. It makes one a child of the Church and a temple of the Holy Spirit. Edgardo was raised as a Catholic and went on to become a priest. He spoke highly of Pius IX and testified to his sanctity after the pope's death.

For the Jewish community and for many others, this painful affair, in addition to the pain it caused the Mortara family, was anti-semitic. It played a role in the sad history of 19th-century anti-semitism. Christians should acknowledge that crimes have been committed against the Jews in the name of Christianity. St. John Paul II acknowledged this and begged forgiveness. There is now in the Catholic Church a growing appreciation for the salvific importance of Judaism and the significant link that exists between Jews and Christians. It is written in the New Testament regarding the Jews that "God's gifts and his call are irrevocable." The Church is discerning more deeply what that means. In the case of Edgardo Mortara, however, there is every reason to believe that the Church would have followed the same course of action with any other non-Christian religion at the time, so that it was not Judaism in particular that motivated the proceedings.

Was Pope Pius IX right or wrong in doing what he did? I don't know. In today's context such a course of action is hardly conceivable. One reason is that Vatican II provided for the possibility that one could be saved outside of Christianity, which was a change in emphasis from the earlier view and, to some, seemed to imply that salvation was not worked out in fear and trembling according to the teaching of the Apostle Paul, nor that the road to heaven was narrow according to the teaching of Jesus. Vatican II was not sanguine about this kind of interpretation: those unfamiliar with the Gospel, it said, are "often deceived by the Evil One. . .and exchange the truth of God for a lie." So in order to "procure the salvation of all of these" it is necessary to preach the Gospel (LG 16). We do not do well to presume hell is not to be feared. We must speak of it as Jesus did.

My purpose here is not to solve the riddle of the Mortara case but to mention d'Alzon's view of it. D'Alzon was a big supporter of Pius IX and unlike many Catholics was in favor of the pope's course of action. For d'Alzon, the sacrament of baptism was of such great significance for the baptized person that it justified the pope's course of action. He held a high view of the sacraments. They established something objective and changed reality; in the case of baptism, marriage, and holy orders they created an unbreakable bond. Regarding the Mortara case, D'Alzon wrote in a letter to his brother in religious life, Vincent de Bailly, that he was even willing to host Mortara himself. It appears d'Alzon had been asked to do so in case of an emergency. He also said that the persecution they were undergoing because of their stance on this issue

was good for them.

This brings us to Amoris Laetitia. We can speculate what d'Alzon's position would be today. Given how far d'Alzon was prepared to go to honor the bond created by baptism, I think we can infer he also would have held a high view of the sacrament of marriage, meaning that a divorced-and-civilly remarried Catholic couple would need to make a resolution to abstain from marital relations out of respect for the bond that already exists between them and their true spouse in order to approach the altar for holy communion. If they should lapse, the sacrament of confession would be available and forgiveness offered if there was a resolution to live by the teaching of the New Testament.

The debate on this issue today is ongoing. One thing we can be sure of is that, given his love for the Church and her teachings, and his repeated admonitions to follow her faithfully, d'Alzon would be with the Church and her teaching office one hundred percent.