

Fr. Benoît Grière, A.A., Superior general

La Croix, May 21, 2017

Re-elected superior general of the Augustinians of the Assumption for another six-year term, Fr. Benoît speaks about the priorities that he was given by the Congregation at the recent general chapter which took place in Lyon, France from April 28 to May 17. Above all, he insists that Assumptionists must be for society an example of fraternal life and solidarity with the most fragile.

La Croix (LC): During your closing address at the chapter on May 17, you re-affirmed your conviction that « the Assumptionists have not spoken their last word ». What does the future hold for an apostolic congregation like yours?"

Fr. Benoît Grière (BG): Our congregation was founded by Emmanuel d'Alzon to respond to the need of proclaiming the Gospel to the men and women of his time and I believe we still have a role to play in this arena. But things have changed: born in the 19th century, the Congregation remained French for a long time. Today we have communities in 30 countries on five continents. We are faced with the challenge of updating our apostolic activities, supported by dynamic, prayerful communities: pluricultural, multi-linguistic, and fraternal. People today are looking for a brotherhood that transcends boundaries. And the heart of the Assumption's witness is just this --- evangelical brotherhood.

LC: Isn't the risk for a religious congregation that it be condemned to irrelevance, to use one of your expressions?

BG: In order not to be condemned to irrelevance, one must avoid closing in on oneself, a kind of ghetto mentality. We must not think that we are the last and only authentic defenders of the faith. That would have us forget that the world is searching for meaning and is waiting for people to show, by their concrete involvement in society, that the absurd is not man's destiny. The problem of our societies is the eclipse of God. An eclipse is not nightfall, but a limited time. Our field of vision has been invaded by idols that obscure God's presence. I truly believe in witnesses who live in solidarity with the neediest and the least among us."

LC: Was there an urgent need for the congregation to rediscover its foundations, especially community life?

BG: A spirit of community is an essential value at the Assumption, characterized by a family spirit and a great simplicity in one's relations. We haven't lost that, but life in community is very demanding because it runs in the face of the autonomy of the individual and underlines belonging to a community.
Religious are not some kind of exceptional beings; they are people who limp along like all human beings. "To use the phrase of St. Augustine, they are wounded healers, or more exactly, "Better to be limping along the right path than running in the wrong direction."
Today lots of people are busy running, but where are they going? We are not better, but we support each other. When someone falls, another is there to pick him up.

LC: Was this priority in evidence during your chapter?

BG: Yes, just like that of seeking unity in a divided world. We reaffirmed what we call the seven « mobilizing works » of the Assumption, designated at the last chapter: the St. Peter-St. Andrew Center in Bucharest, our university, Assumption College, in Worcester (New England), our university ISEAB (Emmanuel d'Alzon Institute of Higher Education), in Butembo (DR Congo), the network of bush schools in Madagascar, Bayard Press, the Adveniat youth hostel in Paris, and the outreach organization called 'Accompagner' in Brussels, that comes to the help of persons in need by providing administration assistance.
We also confirmed the importance of our presence in youth ministry and in teaching, including higher education, but not only three but in parishes where 70% of Assumptionists live. The Chapter also restated the fundamental place of the Lay-Religious Alliance, desired from the beginning by Emmanuel d'Alzon, could do nothing alone.

LC: Have the Assumptionists responded to the Pope's call to go to the peripheries of today's society?

BG: First of all, the Holy See has asked us to maintain our presence in Bulgaria where the Church is weak and poor, a real existential periphery. To go to the peripheries means creating contacts where situations are tense or very fragile, like ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue, in Russia, in Romania, but also in Greece and in Turkey where we're also doing important work with migrants. In Africa, in Tanzania, where we are involved in the first evangelization among the Masai and Sonjo peoples and in the southern regions of Madagascar.

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Some statistics of the Congregation: 900 religious, 60 novices
Expansion in Africa and Asia, scarcity in the West, even to the point of extinction in some places. Fr. Benoît does not gloss over the double aspect of the vocation picture of the Congregation: « We need to take a clear and hard look at the situation. Lands that were generous like Holland and England began to see vocations dry up thirty years ago and that's very painful. We can't bury our heads in the sand and simply say that other vocations from elsewhere will compensate. No, our desire for a universal brotherhood means we must recruit vigorously everywhere we can. »

Interview conducted by Bruno Bouvet