

Dedication Ceremony for the Statue of Venerable Emmanuel d’Alzon
Assumption College. October 23, 2010

This beautiful sculpture in front of the central place of learning on our campus, the library, already named after the founder of the Assumptionists, portrays d’Alzon the *teacher*: Thinking back to our visit, this past May, to Nimes and the original “Assumption College high school”, I can well imagine him, 150 years ago, sitting in front of the school, surrounded by his students, as we see it here. Well, he wouldn’t have had any female students at that school. It was for boys only. But he always thought of teaching in the “most absolute sense of the word” (as he called it), not just as “school education”, so that the many works of charity he did, e.g. the girls’ shelter he founded in 1836, can also be seen as educational endeavors. D’Alzon with a boy and a girl – that stands, I think, for the entire spectrum of pedagogical activities initiated by the French nobleman turned priest. He actually saw education itself as a “work of charity” and as one of those works “through which we shall seek to extend the reign of our Lord”, as he wrote in 1855.

D’Alzon in conversation with students – that obviously represents an act of care and love. And he explicitly demands “love for their students” of the teachers at his school. But how can teaching be love? You might think of Plato and his famous pedagogical *eros*, but also of the biblical “love of wisdom” [we just heard it in the text from the Book of Wisdom], and d’Alzon emphasizes the need for a teacher (1.) to have this flame of passion, the desire to be a seeker of wisdom (a ‘philosopher’) and (2.) to share this with others, to help students seek the truth and “become vessels of truth”, to provide them with an education whose goal is not just information but a “transformation of the entire person” and “building of character”. This goal is difficult to achieve; even a liberal arts education can remain futile and superficial, as d’Alzon’s spiritual ‘hero’, St. Augustine, complained 1600 years ago, when, in his
Confessions
, he understood that, as a teacher of rhetoric, he hadn’t really helped his students develop a

truly critical mind and self-knowledge but had just “sold talkative skills” (IV 2). D’Alzon experienced something similar, and what he says still rings true: “education is not only a way to acquire certain skills necessary for someone preparing for a career” Instead of being inspired by a “calculating mentality”, it involves character education and “moral formation”. D’Alzon envisioned a humanistic Christian education as a much-needed correction and remedy for societal ills such as a disturbing lack of moral orientation and dedication, which, according to d’Alzon, are not caused by evilness but by “ignorance”.

Now, more than just identifying such an education with the Platonic *eros*, I actually see it as an example of Christian *ca ritas* which is, by its very nature, *unconditional*. Similarly, teaching [what we do here, inspired by d’Alzon and the Catholic intellectual. tradition] expresses an unconditional concern and willingness to share something (knowledge) with others without expecting anything in return. That is why d’Alzon sharply criticizes the unconvincing “hirelings” and educational “mercenaries”, teachers without true dedication, concern and “trust” in their students. D’Alzon encourages us to create and foster an “intellectual culture”; but he also reminds us that teaching is most successful when it is done by example, when we “practice what we preach”. Finally, though, he also points out that successful education depends on the students as well and their willingness to let themselves *be* transformed.

It is, therefore, obvious that d’Alzon’s key idea, the transformation of souls, is far from imposing a dogma on anyone. Any education in the spirit of d’Alzon values individuality, “broadmindedness”, “respect” highly; it was said of him that he had founded a “congregation of original people”; and one of his most important educational goals is to foster “critical thinking” and “understanding”. This surely requires guidance, guidance of the soul (*psychagogy*), as Plato calls it. Teachers are sculptors, Plato further says [how fitting a metaphor…], and d’Alzon uses this image in his own reflections on education, adding, however, a biblical dimension to it: teaching is a co-creative act. But it’s not a hegemonic act [‘molding’]; it is a subsidiary aid in one’s discovery of self, revealing the hidden potential within the other. Thus, education, according to d’Alzon, can also be seen as “cooperation in the salvation of mankind”, assistance offered to the student who should learn to “appreciate the spiritual resources God offers you: abandon your weakness, discard it; restore your dignity”. Interesting – and truly philosophical – is the idea that human dignity is not *just* a naturally given fact that comes with certain rights but that it *also* implies duties: the duty to become worthy of one’s dignity as a human being by living a certain way of life.

The Augustinian Rule that d’Alzon chose for his congregation exemplifies such a way of life, seeking a harmony of contemplation and action; the ascent to God is followed by a descent to the world. And d’Alzon’s sometimes all-too-martial language aside, his main idea, to promote an “outpouring of the spirit in the people”, and the instruments he chose to achieve this goal, information and education of the people, are still highly relevant.

Of course, d’Alzon’s insistence on “understanding” applies to our faith as well: to avoid uninformed faith, recurring forms of superstition and a merely superficial religiosity. Convinced of the intrinsic harmony of faith and reason, which became a leitmotif of an Assumptionist education, we need to help our students appreciate the “intellectual respectability” of the Christian faith (as Augustine puts it). This is an indispensable – as well as promising – task for any Catholic educator, especially in present-day America, in an academic landscape which is so much characterized by religious pluralism. And it *will* also lead to true, ecumenical openness, fearlessly embracing diverse forms of religiosity, the autonomy of culture, modernity, science: knowing that the creator-God we believe in can be “found in all things”, such as Fr. d‘Alzon embraced all forms in which the human spirit sincerely seeks the truth. A modern reader might find it irritating to hear that d’Alzon sometimes criticizes “tolerance”: but by that he just means *indifference*
, ungrounded in objective truth, oblivious to the need for truthfulness, a vain and anemic education, deprived of its metaphysical and religious foundations.

But, most of all, we need to give life to our faith by turning it into love, a love that “proves itself by deeds”. D’Alzon adopted this Biblical and Augustinian maxim and truly lived it, showing, as contemporaries said of him, “his faith by his work”. *Thus*, we live “in the truth”. And it is in this sense that education, ultimately, is the social task and obligation as which d’Alzon saw it, serving his goal of “penetrating society with a Christian idea”. Our teaching, which is inspired by love, aims at inspiring love in our students: reaching out to the world, and becoming, in fulfillment of the formative goals of Assumption College’s Mission Statement, “graduates known for critical intelligence, thoughtful citizenship and compassionate service”: evidence of this is, for instance, the amount of time our students dedicate to community service (for which Assumption has been named to the President’s Honor Roll), and thus they follow the example of Fr. d’Alzon’s first students in Nimes.

We should be able to achieve these goals if we can mobilize at least some of the “consuming passion and unbound energy” Fr. d’Alzon had. May this sculpture become not *just* a place of rest – maybe even an icon of student superstition, whose hands or nose they touch for good luck [will happen too, > shiny like John Harvard’s foot in Harvard yard!!!…] – but may it truly be a place where we, students and teachers alike, can pause to think and find inspiration for our

efforts to truly be, as the sign at the main campus entrance says, “a community of learning, faith and service”.

Prof. Christian Gobel, Assumption College

Read more:
Dedication of d'Alzon Statue at Assumption College
Father d’Alzon statue to ‘sit’ as reminder to Assumption students