

ASSUMPTION SISTERS UNITE TO MAINTAIN PRESENCE IN TUNISIA
by Sr. Françoise Audebrand, L.S.A.

(Editor's note: The Little Sisters of the Assumption (LSA) are celebrating their 80th anniversary of presence in Tunisia. Tunisia has had only two presidents since it obtained independence in 1957. The most recent of those presidents fled on Friday, January 17, after more than two decades in power, and now Tunisia is trying something new. A coalition government was recently formed there, and opposition figures have been included in the leadership for the first time. Sr. Françoise traces the history of Assumption's presence in this land of St. Augustine's birth and the signs of new hope for its future. This article was written BEFORE the fall of President Ben Ali)

In 1931 Bishop Lemaître asked the Little Sisters of the Assumption to settle in the capital city of Tunis. Here it is 80 years later and we are still here in one of the five countries of the "Great Arab Maghreb" which extends from Libya to Maurtania. Tunisia is the smallest of these. It has always been at the crossroads of religions and cultures and seen many great civilizations in its history: Punic, Phoenician, Roman, Vandal, Byzantine, Arab, Ottoman, and finally European. Carthage, the ancient capital, of which Augustine often speaks, was one of the great urban centers of the Mediterranean basin.

Tunisia became independent in 1956. Its entire history has favored in its people a spirit of openness, dialogue, and exchange, enriched by so much cultural mix, a mix which has

continued today with the influx of so many immigrants who have settled here. But there is also a robust tourist industry which attracts more than 6 million visitors yearly.

A modern society founded on Islam

The first president, Habib Bourguiba, set the country on the way to modernization. There are a little over 10 million inhabitants and the literacy rate now approaches 80% among adults.

Life in general in Tunisian society is based on the Muslim religion and its Sunni traditions which have legal status. Although at the time of independence, Tunisia seemed to be opening its doors to modern ways, for example with regard to the status of women, in our own day there seems to be a return to former traditions, especially religious, as a result of satellite television programs broadcast from less developed Muslim countries. Nevertheless, there are many educated people who try to present an Islam that is more just and more adapted to the modern world. Among this group of Tunisians, dialogue is strongly favored, evidenced by the number of courses on comparative religions at various universities and the many conferences on the topic.

A place where the three monotheistic religions live together harmoniously

Adherents of the three great monotheistic religions live side by side here in peace. For example, many Jews from around the world come on pilgrimage to the great synagogue of Djerba each year. Christianity has been present here from the earliest days, as bear witness the number of early Church martyrs (Felicity, Perpetua, Cyprian, etc.) and the remains of so many churches and monasteries throughout the country. Since the days of Independence, the Catholic Church has enjoyed special recognition which was formalized in a treaty between the Tunisian government and the Vatican in 1964. It is not a status of complete freedom, but of tolerance (as long as the Church remains ‘discreet’). Membership in the Church is made up almost 100% by foreigners, living in urban areas, and, of course, a minority. In spite of whatever restrictions there may be, the Church has made repeated attempts at dialogue, especially influenced by the spirit of the White Fathers (now known as the Missionaries of Africa). The Church continues to play a prominent role in education and thus maintains good relations with the intellectual elements of Tunisian society. Here were founded several groups of Muslim-Christian dialogue such as the Islamo-Christian Research Group).

And where do we fit in this country?

Having arrived in 1931, the Little Sisters lived in various cities, both in the north and in south. Since 1997, we have been in Hammam-Lif, a southern suburb of Tunis, blue-collar and simple, which has enjoyed a long history of harmony between cultures and religions. We are the unique Christian presence and live in a former rectory. 80 years, then, in this country — but our numbers have diminished. So, we began to ask ourselves: will we have to leave this Muslim land and people?

Then came the 2008 RIAD meeting of the Assumption Family *(editor's note: RIAD is the French acronym for Rencontre International de l'Assomption pour le Dialogue or International Meeting of the Assumption Family for Dialogue).*
During this meeting, which addressed the question of Islam, the Oblates of the Assumption, our sister congregation, founded by Fr. d'Alzon in 1865 for the Eastern European mission, were touched by our situation in Tunisia and, after a long discernment, decided to join us in our mission and form a "mixed" community here in Hammam-Lif . So it was that this past autumn the three of us Little Sisters of the Assumption welcomed one Congolese sister, Béatrice, and one Rwandan sister, Juliette.

What will unite us?

This new project is possible because we are sisters within the Assumption Family, cousins so to speak, founded in the same year, 1865, the Oblates by Fr. d'Alzon himself and we by one of Fr. d'Alzon's first disciples, Étienne Pernet. We share a common passion for the coming of the Kingdom of God, handed down by our founders, and both feel the missionary call to be among this Muslim people. Then, of course, there is our common spiritual heritage and attachment to the great local saint, St. Augustine. The adventure has begun, enriched by our cultural and religious differences, reflecting the image of the Christian Church here in Tunisia, and united by and founded on the One who told us, "They will know you are my disciples by the love that you have for one another."