

- Fr. Jean Daniel, you have been in Jerusalem for several months. Could you tell us how you see our presence there within the framework of the Assumptionist « Mission d'Orient" (Near Eastern Mission)?

- Let me underline what you say: I have only lived in Jerusalem several months. Since 1973 I have taken about 60 groups of pilgrims there. But it's one thing to bring a group of pilgrims and another thing altogether to live there.

To answer your question, I would say that Jerusalem holds a unique place within the « Mission d'Orient », because it is at the very source of this mission. Ah, yes! The creation in Jerusalem of a Maronite seminary to train young seminarians whom Fr. d'Alzon received at his collège in Nîmes after the massacres of Christians in the Lebanese hills in 1860 was supposed to be our first foundation in the Near East. Fr. d'Alzon had been informed of the possibility of buying the Cenacle and had obtained the agreement of the Patriarch of Jerusalem and of Cardinal Barnabo, Prefect of the Propaganda Fidei in Rome. Filled with enthusiasm, Fr. d'Alzon even thought of buying the Tomb of the Virgin as a foundation site for the Religious of the Assumption!

He had hoped to pursue this project when he came to Rome in May 1862 with a group of pilgrims for the canonization of Japanese martyrs. But a number of Roman churchmen turned his attention from Jerusalem to Istanbul in order to establish there a seminary to form the clergy of the Bulgarian Church in union with Rome. Fr. d'Alzon, who didn't wish to be taken as fickle, wanted to be sure that this was really the will of the pope. This is the context in which the now famous blessing of Pius IX took place during an audience on June 3, 1862, « I bless your works in the East and the West. ».

It would be 20 years later that Jerusalem would come back into the picture; in 1882, Fr. Picard, Fr. d'Alzon's successor, brought thousands of pilgrims for the first 'pilgrimage of repentance.' This pilgrimage, renewed year after year, is in fact the reason why the Assumptionists are in Jerusalem. In order to receive these pilgrims the Assumptionists built the large hotel complex of Notre-Dame de France. Soon thereafter, the community would begin welcoming young student religious who, under the supervision of Fr. Joseph Germer-Durand, would undertake archaeological excavations as of 1887 on the grounds of St.-Peter-in-Gallicantu. They would also edit numerous scholarly publications which the Institute of Byzantine Studies inherited and maintains to this day. After World War I, the Assumptionists were completely focused on welcoming pilgrims, even if a few students would spend time there for specialized studies in Scripture. It is this mission of welcome that the community of St. Peter-in-Gallicantu continues to this day.

- Are you saying that your mission does not consist first of all, as it does for our other communities in Turkey, Bulgaria, Russia, Romania and Greece, in working for Christian unity?

- As I mentioned, the mission of the community in Jerusalem is focused entirely on pilgrims; however, precisely for that reason, Jerusalem offers pilgrims, more than any other of our communities, the opportunity of discovering the diversity of the Christian churches, some of which have been present there since the very beginnings of Christianity. Ecumenism begins with knowing each other. Every Assumptionist who accompanies pilgrims to the Holy Land should be concerned with making these churches known and with foreseeing meetings with them. There is no problem whatsoever in attending a Eucharistic celebration at the Melkite Patriarchate and in so doing to help pilgrims discover the Byzantine liturgy and the reality of a Catholic church that ordains married men. Instead of being scandalized at the divisions one discovers at the Holy Sepulcher, it is better to help our pilgrims see the wealth of this diversity and the desire of all Christians in the world to be present in Jerusalem, for the most part by small national communities. You see that this concern should be that of every Assumptionist who accompanies pilgrims and not that solely of those who live at St. Peter-in-Gallicantu.

- In what exactly, then, does your welcome of pilgrims at St. Peter-in-Gallicantu consist?



