

Presentation to the Plenary General Council (Rome, Dec.12, 2012)

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Introduction

First of all, I would like to thank you for the welcome you've given me – and above all to thank our Superior General for inviting me, first of all to be present with you at this important moment in the life of the Congregation when we met Pope Benedict XVI and, then, for the opportunity to speak to you about ecumenism at the Assumption (as I did last year, at the same time, on the Near Eastern Mission, "Mission d'Orient").

When I address the novices of the Province of France, to kick off their year of formation, as I do each year at Juvisy, I always begin by telling them that *"there is at the Assumption what I would call an 'obsession with Christian unity,' something that constitutes a family trait, however much religious and communities may ultimately make of it a preoccupation in their ministry, but also in their prayer."*

- e.g. this morning's event (i.e. audience with the Holy Father granted by the Vatican because of the sesquicentennial of the Near Eastern Mission), even if the Pope didn't mention it at all!

- e.g. also, everything that we have been able to experience during this jubilee year of the Near Eastern Mission, especially the meeting of the brothers and sisters involved in this Mission in Moscow at the end of June, the celebration in November in Plovdiv of the double anniversary of our three martyrs (60 years since they died, 10 years since they were beatified)

- everything yet to take place: at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris on December 16 and elsewhere, e.g. at Kadiköy (Turkey), soon, I hope, to mark the 150th anniversary of the arrival of Fr. Victorin Galabert to Constantinople, on December 20, 1862, the veritable beginning of the Near Eastern Mission on the ground.

N.B. I will not be going back over everything I said last year about the history and current situation of the Near Eastern Mission; I said enough last year at this time to the PGC. I would make an exception, however, with regard to the first letter of our new Superior General to the religious of the Congregation, entitled *"Passion for Unity"* and dedicated precisely to our 150 years of presence in the Near Eastern Mission.

A - Historical reminder: What was the 'ecumenical' intuition of Fr. d'Alzon?

The 'family trait' of which I spoke a moment ago truly constitutes part of our genetic inheritance… dating back to the family line of Fr. d'Alzon and its background in the Cévennes Mountains region. As you know, the Daudé family (d'Alzon) distinguished itself, during the wars of religion that ravaged 16th century France (particularly in the Midi, the southern area of the country where Fr. d'Alzon lived), by a steadfast commitment in the struggle – including armed conflict - against the "so-called Reformed" religionists. And one day in 1704, that is to say during the "War of the Camisards", set off in the Cévennes region by the Louis XIV's revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 (promulgated by Henri IV in 1598), an ancestor of Fr. d'Alzon was killed by the rebellious Protestants that he was pursuing. Well, Emmanuel d'Alzon was born barely a century after this incident, whose bitter memory remained acutely alive in his family as it did throughout the Cévennes, where tensions resulting from the wars of religion were far from being quelled.

So it was that as a young priest, Emmanuel d'Alzon committed himself to the eradication of Protestantism (of which he would say at the end of his life that,

"

Our Protestant friends, lost in the labyrinth of free thought, have little time for dogma, so they

concentrate only on moral issues
",
ES
p. 636,
Seventh Supplementary Meditation
, trans. Stephen Raynor)! Besides, the Carmelite monastery that he founded in Nîmes in 1843 was meant to give spiritual support to his work with Protestants (cf.
Le Père d'Alzon et l'œcuménisme
, by Fr. Daniel Olivier, A.A. [DO], Rome, 1980, «Centenary Series», #7, p.14). However, his views were not always so aggressive, as demonstrated in his well-known article published in '
La Liberté pour tous,'
thanks to the Romanticism spawned by the Revolution of
1848
:
«
We will remain Catholic and you Protestant
(…) Freedom of conscience is a principle, because it alone will allow us to shed some light on these discussions in peace, after which sincere minds, longing to be united,
will be able to meet each other in a like charity, while they wait to meet each other in a like faith
» (# 24, dated May 9, 1848). Here our founder strikes a very modern tone with respect to ecumenism… even if he cannot help clarifying right away:
«We believe we are in the truth and believe you are in error»
- we shouldn't be too demanding! Still, he does revert to a less tolerant and more triumphalistic view of the unity of all Christians.

What strikes me is that the different levels of Fr. d'Alzon's practical approach to Protestantism were deeply interconnected: in word, in prayer, and, to be sure, in action. Already this point should grab our attention as his heirs involved in the work of Christian unity:

- in word: cf. the articles that have been quoted, but also the 'high-impact' speeches he delivered in Nîmes…

- in prayer: the foundation in the 1850s of the Adorers of the Blessed Sacrament (whose task it was, in particular, to pray for «the conversion of Protestants » - *ES*, p. 1224-1226); and also of the St. Francis-de-Sales Society focused on prayer and almsgiving in view of the conversion of Protestants.

- in action: social works (orphanages and homes for the elderly targeting Protestants, e.g.

Oeuvre de Sainte-Thérèse), his plans for foundations in England and Australia (in the latter, between 1860-1875, a few religious ended up being scattered about), and, of course, the Near Eastern Mission – to which I need not emphasize much, but in which he invested a lot of energy, especially once he realized his lack of success in converting the 'heretics' (cf. his report to the *Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*/Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, 1878): « *Concerned with dedicating my life to the defense of the Church and the Holy See, which is its center, I believed that I had an obligation to devote myself to the conversion of Protestants. In spite of the fact that I had little success at it, I realized quickly that Protestantism, in terms of doctrine, had lost its clout (…) But I saw quite clearly that in the West Rome is under attack by the Revolution, by free-thinkers, and by secret societies, while in the East it is the schism (and the most formidable expression of this schism is the Russian schism* » - text found in Siméon Vailhé, A.A., *Vie du. P. Emmanuel d'Alzon, vicaire général de Nîmes, fondateur ses Augustins de l'Assomption (1810-1880)*, 2 volumes: vol. I, 1810-1851, Paris, Bonne Presse, 1926, p. XVII-602 ; vol. II, 1851-1880, Paris, Bonne Presse, 1934, 792 p., vol. 2, p. xi).

Just as important as Fr. d'Alzon's actions were to restore the unity of all Christians around the Pope was the spirit in which he did them. Fr. Daniel Olivier, A.A., in his booklet on "*Le P. d'Alzon et l'œcuménisme"* (1980, Centenary Series, #7), notes that the «doctrine itself is not very ecumenical," but "it stems nevertheless from an authentic preoccupation: love of the Church and a desire to conform to the directives of Rome" (p. 18). I should draw your attention here to the deep roots our founder had in St. Augustine, with the bishop of Hippo's obsession for unity at every level, of every community to the Church as a whole.

However, his actual knowledge of the doctrines as well as the players of the other Churches al ways remained quite weak ; so we do not even know if he had close, personal relationships with Protestants nor whether he had studied the primary texts of Reformation theology. His strong and lasting conviction was that " *Protestantism is nothing more than a cadaver; whatever is still stirring cannot be described as life* " (1866). The expansion of the liberal Protestantism of the 19th century surely falls under the umbrella of this rather repulsive image of the Reformation. As a result, his entire view of ecumenism would be colored in the measure that, as Fr. Olivier says, *"his search for unity would be based on his belief that the Protestant heresy was in its death throes"* (p. 24).

D’Alzon was well aware of the Oxford Movement (he read everything Newman wrote in the original), and was particularly taken by his attraction to Rome, by everything that drew Anglicanism to Catholicism, but never anything that would call Catholicism to change! It was his close and thorough study of this Anglican movement, as well as his personal friendship with this or that Anglican, that would lead him, from the early years of his priesthood, to come up with his wide-ranging plan to convert Protestants.

Rather quickly, in fact, Orthodox Christianity seemed more attractive in Fr. d'Alzon's eyes (as it did for many Catholics in the West at the time), because, albeit schismatic, there was nothing heretical about it; you could agree on the fundamentals of the faith, something that was impossible with the adherents of the Reformation! The Eastern schism, therefore, seemed a lot more approachable and less frustrating than the heresy of the West… (As for the scholar, Etienne Fouilloux, he alleges that the Assumptionists suffered from a lasting error, a dichotomous way of thinking, accusing Protestantism of being inflexible and driven by the darkest designs, whereas Orthodoxy was appreciated for its entirely Eastern suppleness (
Les catholiques et l’unité chrétienne du XIXe au XXe siècle
; Centurion, 1982 – cf. especially p. 62f and 862-868 on the Assumptionists). This may well explain why d'Alzon turned to the East to reinvest almost all of the energy of his passion for unity.

That completes the picture of Fr. d'Alzon from a personal point of view. I would like to emphasize one point, perhaps an important lesson for us who are his sons and wish to remain faithful to him. **With our founder, the obsession with Christian unity had two sources**: his personal history
(his family, the region of Nîmes itself, his friendships) and
a call from the Church
, something that was higher and that may have even caught him a little short! Therefore, we can ask ourselves if we are attentive enough, both as individuals and as a body, to the calls that still come to us today, not simply as a result of our personal or community histories, but also calls --- at times daunting – which may be addressed to the Assumption today in view of Unity.

Let's move on now to the "ecumenical" orientation of his congregation (the quotation marks are intentional!). From his very first draft of a rule, Fr. d'Alzon spelled out
"working to destroy schism and heresy"
(‘Notes on a Constitutional Project,’ 1849-1850, in
ES,
p. 656). And he goes on to clarify: «
One of the greatest evils of modern times is the spirit of separation which tends to dissolve the

bonds between the minds of men. Accordingly, one of the reasons for the existence of our little Congregation must be found in our endeavor as teachers to draw minds and hearts ever closer to the common center which Christ has given to His Church
" (
E
S
p. 655 – taken up again in the chapter entitled "Teaching" in the 'Directory,'
ES
p. 96).

It is in terms of «*mission*» that he most often defines this aspect of his plan for a new congregation, which places his desire for unity within the undeniable logic of proselytizing (the 19th century, it is well known, was one with enormous missionary activity, both for Protestants and Catholics). Clearly, we are quite far from a modern view of Christian unity…

In the Catholicism of this period, there was not the slightest opening for dialogue with Christians who were not united to Rome, and even less to imagine that the Catholic Church might stand to gain something from other Churches that it might not have itself, even if it dealt with something that didn't go to the heart of the faith! If there was an "ecumenical" movement (but, remember, this phrase had no meaning before 1910 and the First World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh), then it was clearly a one-way street, everything and everyone leading to Rome. Any other form of the Church union was condemned, until Vatican II, as an unacceptable 'pan-Christianism,' that was to be seen as nothing more than the basest Protestant maneuver (cf. encyclical
Mortalium animos
by Pius XI, 1928).

Can Fr. Alzon be held liable for a certain prototype of such a unionism? *«Ecumenism per se was absolutely unthinkable for this Catholic priest of the 19th century»*
(DO, p. 8). In 1864, when the Holy Office condemned an "association to promote Christian unity," a group with Anglican roots that included Catholics and that was meant to encourage prayer for unity and not doctrine, d'Alzon approved: «
Of course, the Catholic Church prays for the conversion of everyone, but excludes from the communion of its prayers those who do not submit to its teaching and do not accept its faith. Catholics must, therefore, refrain from joining any group
that favors indifferentism
and causes even greater scandal. In fact, indifferentism is the greatest evil of the present age.
»

Was our founder more papist than the Pope when it came to unionism? That's what the historian Étienne Fouilloux thinks:
«With its work in the East, the main proponent of unionism in French-speaking Europe remained the congregation of the Augustinians of the Assumption»
(in
Les catholiques et l'unité chrétienne
…, p. 862). One can see a certain emphasis during the first half of the 20th century, a continuation of Fr. d'Alzon's commitment: cf. our Our Lady of the Assumption Archconfraternity of Prayer for the conversion of Protestants as well as Eastern Christians (Leo XIII, then Pius X were members!), but there was also the tone of our reviews such as
L'Unité de l'Eglise
, etc.

In fact, it is absolutely necessary to see with our founder the intimate connection between his obsession with Church unity and his involvement in the ultramontane battle
, with its background in a Counter-Revolution spirit (even more than that of the Counter-Reformation). There's a great deal of consistency here: if ultramontanism considered the Pope as the only possible source and guarantor of the unity of believers and peoples, it was only with him and under him («
cum Petro et sub Petro
») that all could and must be united: heretics as well as schismatics, but also Catholics who resist the authority of Rome: ecumenism, in the dalzonian sense, applied to heretics and schismatics, but also to anti-Roman Gallicans.

And the unity that underlay d'Alzon's thought was that of the Church, of course, but also of society, even beyond French borders. And this is just how the high school students of his school in Nîmes spoke (in the 1870s): *"Europe lost its essence when it lost its unity, and it lost its unity when it parted company, to a greater or lesser degree, with the Catholic Church. The Protestants may be the first to blame – but so are the Jansenists, the Gallicans, the 18th century philosophers of the so-called 'Enlightenment', and free-thinking Catholics of our own day* » (*ES*, p. 1400, trans. Raynor).

So, we're not going to thrust Fr. d'Alzon into the forefront as a prophet of ecumenism in the modern sense of the term. However, we can see in him one of the figures of the 19th century who most consistently and fervently emphasized the vital need that all of Christ's disciples should be one in view of the coming of the Kingdom of God
. For d'Alzon that meant united behind the Pope, to be sure!

We might want to ponder these words of his again: *«One of the missions of the Assumption is to achieve unity , a unity of love, feeling, faith, longing, and the determination to bring about the triumph of the Church. For this, we need a boundless heart ; we should love everything Our Lord loved* (in J.-P. Périer-Muzet, *Praying 15 Days with Emmanuel d'Alzon* , p. 50).

B - The posterity of Fr. d'Alzon with regard to the commitment to Unity

Let me underline here that I am not a historian; therefore, I don't have all the tools necessary, in terms of knowledge or analytical capacity, to put into proper perspective the few elements that I was able to glean in my own research --- and which, I should add, are not legion. Perhaps I didn't conduct my research well. There doesn't exist, as far as I have been able to discover, a 'compendium' on the history of ecumenical involvement of our Congregation (cf. already Fr. Claude Maréchal's entreaty in his Letter #5 to religious in 1990, *'Men of Unity in Divided Churches'* , p. 25 : «Arranging quite soon for the draft of a history of Unity at the Assumption»!). While we're on this topic, this could be a research project that we could entrust to historians close to us Assumptionists, or even to a young religious as a topic for a university thesis!

In any event, I think we can begin by saying ---if only by way of reassurance ---- that the Assumption, as far as the question of Christian unity is concerned as well as many other issues, has kept up with the evolution of the Catholic Church as a whole, first when it initially rejected involvement in the ecumenical movement and then, with Vatican II, got officially involved in the way of ecumenism; until the Council, Fouilloux alleges, especially in the persons of Fathers Jugie and Janin, it essentially held to its 'unionist' position.

1) One could first of all call to mind religious personally involved in major ecumenical activities, whether formal or informal. Thus,

= at the time of Vatican II, four Assumptionists were named as members or consultants of the pre-conciliar Commission on the Eastern Churches, including Fathers Elpide Stephanou, Daniel Stiernon and Jerome Cornelis;

= Fr. George Tavard edited a section of *Unitatis redintegratio* before getting involved in various national (USA) and international bilateral dialogues, especially with the Anglicans, Lutherans and Methodists;

= at the same time, Fr. Antoine Wenger played a role behind the scenes in the historic meeting between Paul VI and Athenagoras ;

= later, Fr. Patrick Van der Aalst (Nijmegen) was named by John Paul II as a member of the International Mixed Commission for the theological dialogue between Catholics and Orthodox from the very beginning of its existence in 1979.

And I haven't mentioned a lot of other less well-known, but no less important, examples. I didn't mention, for example, Fr. Daniel Olivier, Fr. Jean-Pierre Pin and Fr. Bruno Chenu (co-president of the Group of Dombes, or yours truly who has followed in his footsteps today). Nor did I mention, and it should be evident, all those many Byzantine scholars, especially in France (Albert Failler, the only survivor today) and in Holland, those who worked in Lebanon and then in Nijmegen (whose Institute for Eastern Christianity is unique today in extending the Byzantine world to encompass all the components of Eastern Churches). And I am sure that there are many others in each of your provinces that you could name and together we would do well to keep alive their memory!

So it is that the Assumption over the years, especially since the Council, has produced some real «models» of modern ecumenism – understanding by the word «models » not men who are examples of human perfection, but down-to-earth Assumptionists who were able to roll up their sleeves and get something substantial down (one concrete example was "Chenu Day" held in Valpré, France, on May 29, 2010, that presented the portraits of three very different and yet in some ways very similar Assumptionists, who dedicated their ministry, not to say their lives, to the cause of Christian unity --- all of whom I have already mentioned: Fathers Antoine Wenger, George Tavard and Bruno Chenu.

To these names of Frenchmen should be added an impressive cast of Belgians, among them especially Fathers Jerome Cornelis, director of the Assumption review '*Unitas'*, and afterward, for more than 30 years active with the bishops' committee on ecumenism in France and its review ' *Unité des chrétiens* ' ; Philippe Liessens, who worked with Fr. Cornelis but also launched the «fraternités des Cévennes», gatherings of Catholic and Protestant youth; and, of course, Daniel Stiernon, who taught patristics at the Lateran for more than 30 years.

…not to mention our bishops, who, in their own way, made a significant contribution as members of our Congregation in the Church's involvement in the work for Christian unity. Of the 14 Assumptionists who have been called to the episcopate to our day, 8 have, in fact, come out of our ecumenical involvement, essentially in the East ---(in the order of their episcopal ordination): Most Revs. Petit, Neveu, Voutsinos, Cristea, Varthalitis, Stratiev, Djoundrine and Pelâtre.

2) What is clearly most important for us is the obsession for unity that Fr. d'Alzon left as a legacy to the Congregation as such : «Assumption's apostolic involvement in Christian unity comes across less as a disciple's imitation, perpetuating models received from a master, than as a legacy given to sons, recognizable from generation to generation in its 'dalzonian' traits, one that constitutes in itself the posthumous ecumenical effort of the one who gave birth to it out of his love for the Church and its unity» (DO. p. 69).

=a few **events, places, moments that stand out**:

- the Assumptionist contribution to the birth of the Annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity: it is not too well known that as of 1929 (a little "daring" only a year after ' *Mortalium animos'* , and four year before Fr. Couturier), the Assumptionists in Lyon – I don't know them by name - organized a triduum in the crypt of the Chapel of the Sisters of the Adoration Réparatrice, from January 18 to 20.

- the constitutive ecumenical dimension of Assumptionist works, like Bayard, to name just one (Christian unity is, for example, just one non-negotiable dimension of this involvement at ' *La Croix'* and it has been so for at least 50 years!), but there are many others, too, which you can all bring

to mind within each of your own provinces.

- our two (remarkable!) international and inter-Assumption initiatives, ecumenical formation endeavors, one leading to the other:

a) the COIA (Commission œcuménique internationale de l'Assomption/the International Ecumenical Commission of the Assumption) first founded in 1972 by three religious (Gilles Blouin, Bruno Chenu and Julian Walter); it brought together men and women religious involved in or concerned with the work of Christian unity every two years until 1998, whether they worked in the field of theology or pastoral ministry;

b) then there was the RIAD (Rencontre internationale de l'Assomption pour le dialogue/International Meeting of the Assumption for Dialogue) which replaced the COIA in 2002 and is under the direction of the general councils of the Assumption Family; it brings together every two or three years mostly young religious on ecumenical or interreligious topics: the 6th edition (after Valpré, Durau, Nairobi, London, and Rio de Janeiro) is in the works for next July in Bangkok (Thaïland).

…not to be forgotten is an "International Ecumenical Commission" created by the Council of the Congregation in the 1980s to stimulate reflection and initiatives within provinces and communities in order to favor Christian Unity.

+ there are two levels of collaboration in our ecumenical work not to be forgotten:

- with our sisters, and most especially with the Oblates of the Assumption, since they were founded (in 1865 --- soon to be celebrating their sesquicentennial, just as we did!) to work side by side with us in the Near East

- with lay-people, whether they are working side by side with us or not. Those who are, for example, members of the Alliance (lay Assumptionists), know, for their part, that such a priority forms an integral part of their vocation; perhaps it would be worthwhile to make this even clearer

not only in their formation (we're still waiting for the booklet, "Thy Kingdom Come," to see the light of day!), but in their mission as well.

= the **texts of the Congregation**: constitutions and successive general chapters:

- First of all, it should be noted that the formulation of the triple orientation «doctrinal/social/ ecumenical» of the Assumption, considered 'canonical' today, did not appear until well after the founder, originally in the *Capitular Rules* (C R) of 1964 : « *The Assumption, from its very beginning and throughout its history, has favored works that are doctrinal, social, and ecumenical* » (CR 186); the *Constitutions* of 1969 would prefer saying: *«We wish to imbue all our activities with a doctrinal, social, and ecumenical spirit* » (#15); taken up again in our current *Rule of Life* , #16 **:** ***« All our undertakings shall be imbued with a doctrinal, social, and ecumenical spirit »*** , something that is much better....but also more demanding!

- From more recent general chapters, we can cite:

= in 1999: *«The General Chapter requests that each local community be ecumenical - a place of communion and a place of prayer for unity; and that it collaborate more closely with those who, like us, are open to ecumenism.*
Each community

will make a special point of praying for unity in the Orient....The dialogue of charity precedes and prepares the dialogue of truth. Ecumenical work is not just the prerogative of specialists or for those who live in the Near East . It is also part of our collaboration with other Christian Churches at the level of justice, peace, and solidarity.
» (# 69) – could it be said any better than that?

= in 2005: *«As Assumptionists, we carry the concern for ecumenism in our genes. Even if it is difficult to promote Christian unity, the Assumption has been committed, from its beginnings, to this lasting cause....We are called to work for it wherever we find ourselves*
» (# 12, 13).

= as for the General Chapter of 2011 (*cf. the document found as an annex to the Acts*): it is striking to see, in hindsight, that during this chapter ecumenism did not play a major role in the deliberations. It appears 4 times in the texts and 4 times in the messages, whether with a negative tone (in terms of current difficulties) or with a specific reference to the Near Eastern Mission (including Bucharest!), or, finally, as part of the lists of apostolates ‘ad extra’ (in the messages). Just one comment, if I may ---------- I don't find this too inspiring.

C – What can we do if we want to faithful to Fr. d'Alzon today?

In 1982, the Council of the Congregation conducted an inquiry in all the Provinces of the Congregation which included three questions:

- What is happening in your Province in the area of ecumenism?

- Could you give us the reason for this involvement, or the lack thereof?

- In your country (countries), how is the problem of Christian Unity played out?

I would encourage you to read the synthesis of answers that were given by the Provinces… and I would say that it might be good to conduct a similar inquiry now, exactly 30 years later!

While waiting for such an inquiry, it would seem to me that, in addition to strengthening initiatives already cited, there are a great number of other actions that are possible, even pressing, at different levels of ecumenism. Let me suggest a few.

To be sure, not all of us are called to be professional "ecumenists"… Nevertheless, by virtue of the mere fact that we are Assumptionists, all of us are called to be concerned with the cause of Christian unity , each in accordance with his personal charism, within the context where he lives out the call he has received.

Therefore, it is up to each Province, to each community, and to each religious to ask themselves how it is possible to get involved either on a somewhat permanent basis or from time to time at various levels.

A helpful tool in engaging in discernment at each of these levels (personal/ community/ Province) would be to remind ourselves that unity is to be built at five different levels (at least!), each complementing the other. Each religious as such, each community as such, and each Province as such should be able to find at least one of these five levels within its reach!

1 - Institutional ecumenism: this isn't the most accessible for us ---- in any case, independently. Still, the Assumption is an institution, and its charism for the Unity of Christians is recognized by the Church ---or rather, by the Churches. We can certainly do better what we're already doing as an institution to be actively involved in the effort of reconciling the Churches, whether at the

level of the entire Congregation or at the national level. This could mean, for example, getting involved with local Church organizations established for the purpose of fostering Unity, or, for the general curia, with Vatican organizations such as the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, or bishops' commissions for Unity or national organizations of the Council of Churches in each country.

2 - Doctrinal ecumenism – sometimes called "the dialogue of truth». Here as well, not all religious are called to get involved; nevertheless, I think that it is absolutely necessary for the Assumption to develop its ecumenical involvement at a theological level. Right off the bat, it must be said that we are sorely lacking today in the area of trained specialists such as the ones I listed above (the Tavards, Wengers, Chenus, Van der Aalsts, etc.) and who, to be sure, are not made in a day: that is another reason why we must appeal to young religious to seriously invest in this field !

But also, since every Assumption has a vocation to "study" (as d'Alzon himself insisted), it is really necessary to push every Assumptionist to read works treating the doctrine of the other Churches and of the dialogue between them and the Catholic Church. More than any other Christian, an Assumptionist, because he wishes to be at once "a man of faith" and "a man of communion," cannot let himself be unconcerned with the manner in which other Christian confessions express their faith.

3 - Ecumenism in the service of one's fellow man and society – sometimes called "the dialogue of charity." In this regard two of the major priorities of recent chapters coincide: "men of communion" and "men in solidarity with the poor." Each of us, each of our communities, at one time or another, in one way or another, is involved in activities or existing structures of *diakonia*
/service. It would really be advisable that we do so, whenever and wherever possible, in collaboration with Christians of other confessions who are conducting similar services. It's a question of credibility for the witness we claim to bear. It is, as well, a way of honoring the ecumenical principle that came out of the meeting of the Faith and Order Conference of the World Council of Churches held in Lund, Sweden, in 1952: “do together everything except what irreconcilable differences of sincere conviction compel us to do separately”: a wonderful challenge!

4- Everyday ecumenism – sometimes called «the dialogue of life». Few of us, probably, cross paths often with Christians of other confessions in our daily lives. Others ---that is to say, all of us --- do, now and again, even if briefly, have contact with Protestants, Anglicans/ Episcopalians, Orthodox, or Evangelical Christians… Do we know how --- dare we --- take

advantage of these opportunities to get to know better these believers who are Christians in a way unlike us? Do we know how --- dare we --- consider them not as competitors (indeed like "damned sects"!), but as brothers and sisters? Do we know how -- dare we --- to propose exchanges with them, indeed, where possible, even prayer together?

5 – Last, but not least: spiritual ecumenism. Who would dare dispense himself from the spiritual unity to be achieved and manifested among all of Christ's followers? Cf. the ‘
Manual of Spiritual Ecumenism,’
of Cardinal Walter Kasper (2007) : «The search for Christian unity is, above all, a
desire
to be kept alive and a
prayer
to be nourishes…spiritual ecumenism is the soul of the whole ecumenical movement». The possibilities are many – I was going to say: infinite – to practice it, either individually or in community: to be nourished from the spirituality of other traditions (and sometimes, in so doing, to rediscover the joy of one's own!), from personal reading, from our community prayer, but also from going to pray at the places of worship of other Christians, from participation in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity but at other moments as well (Easter…), etc.

Conclusion: **An "ecumenical" Congregation?**

In contrast to other institutes of consecrated life dedicated, by the charism of their founding, to Christian Unity (the Atonement Friars, the Bose and Taizé communities…), the Assumption is not a congregation that "specializes" in this area, but
it is, however, a religious family that
has this virus in its blood
.

Ecumenism is one of those things that Assumptionists do more of (and better than?) others. One should hear this formula first of all in the sense that our religious family is more involved in it than many other religious families, because it's in our blood. But I would like to be able to have it understood as well --- and I ask you, my brothers, to do everything in your power to make it so --- in the sense that, among all the things that the Assumptionists do ---- and God knows they do a lot ----ecumenism is one thing that they do more of than other things because it deals with their priorities. No matter which religious, which communities, which provinces. No matter what they do. Or where they do it. We need workers in the vast field of Christian unity ---- and not only in Bucharest, and not only in Eastern Europe!

By way of conclusion there remain one conviction and one question.

My **conviction**: Our commitment to Unity cannot be a question only, or even essentially, of our "doing." It is something that should be determined at the level of our "being." Not simply our "Assumptionist being," in the genetic sense cited previously, but more fundamentally our Christian being. It is not a question, first of all, nor essentially, of being formed a little in order to help to repair the seamless cloak of Christ, torn by centuries of division; it is a question fundamentally of coming to the awareness that I need other Christians, those who are Christian in other ways than I, so that I myself can become fully Christian. Of course, with the firm hope that the discovery of my "incompleteness" will be useful to my "separated brother," and that this discovery in each of us will then help in the exchange between us, the famous "exchange of gifts" which, according to the mysterious Providence of God, will ensure that the divisions of yesteryear will have at least paved the way to develop traditions and sentiments that are authentically evangelical, traditions and sentiments that might otherwise have never happened and that might, now that the hostilities are behind us, mutually enrich us.

Such a conviction must then be translated into **conversion**: not only in the way we look at the other (as our Congregation was able to do throughout its history and together with the evolution of the whole Church), but also a conversion in the way we look at ourselves: the incompleteness of which I just spoke must lead us to reject any pretention of possessing, by ourselves alone, the Truth, and thus to be the sole heirs of Christ "in a direct line." A test? If we were to draw the genealogical tree of the Church, what we would most often see emerging would be a huge trunk...which would be, obviously (?) Catholic, and stemming from it small branches appearing over the centuries, but whose roots as well as whose tops are ---to be sure --- Roman!

And my **question**: who will rise up to be sent into the vast field of Unity?

I wish to thank you for your kind and fraternal attention.

Fr. Michel Kubler, A.A. (St. Peter-St. Andrew Center, Bucharest)

Sources used:

= « Eglise catholique romaine et chrétiens d'Orient (XIXe-XXe s.)», by Etienne Fouilloux, in *L'a venture missionnaire assomptionniste,*
under the supervision of Fr. Bernard Holzer, A.A. (Actes du colloque de Valpré 2000, Coll. « Recherches Assomption» n° 1, Maison généralice, 751 p., 2002 ?), p. 71-79.

= *Emmanuel d'Alzon dans la société et l'Eglise du XIXe siècle*, under the supervision of Profs. René Rémond and Emile Poulat (Actes du colloque de Paris 1980, Centurion, 1982) – especially « Le P. d'Alzon et la crise du protestantisme au XIXe s. » (D. Olivier, p. 165-178), « L'apostolat des Assomptionnistes auprès des Bulgares, de 1862 à 1880 » (J. Walter, p. 180-196) and « L'œuvre orientale du Père d'Alzon vue par ses fils (1890-1980) » (E. Fouilloux, p. 199-220).

= *Les catholiques et l'unité chrétienne du XIXe au XXe siècle*, d'Etienne Fouilloux (Centurion, 1982) – cf. especially p. 62f and 862-868 on the Assumptionists.

= *Le Père d'Alzon et l'œcuménisme*, by Daniel Olivier (Rome 1980, « Série du centenaire » n° 7, 79 p.) – cited as « DO ».

Here are some complementary notes I received after the conference:

= from John Franck, the North American province:

1) First of all Assumption College in Worcester launched a number of ecumenical initiatives just after the Council, the most important of which was the foundation of an institute called "The Ecumenical Institute" which played an important role in the regional and national dialogue in the United States. Here is the description found on the College's website:

Welcome

The Ecumenical Institute at Assumption College was established in 1968 as a response to the decisions of the Second Vatican Council and rejuvenated in 1999 to provide a forum for reflection and discussion of questions of common interest to Christians of all churches and to people of other faiths. The Institute seeks to clarify the differences that divide Christians, as well as the common issues confronting all believers in our day—namely, the relation of faith to the modern world. The Institute is particularly sensitive to the fact that, in many instances, the real

problems persons of faith encounter today lie deeper than the issues that have traditionally divided Christian churches and other faith communities.

In 1981 the Institute organized a major ecumenical study session attended by Johannes Cardinal Willebrands who served as President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity from 1969 to 1989.

The Institute facilitated and hosted many regional inter-confessional dialogues: between Catholics and Lutherans, Catholics and Anglicans, and Catholics and Methodists during its history.

The Institute organizes the College's annual Emmanuel d'Alzon Lecture, Rabbi Joseph Klein Lecture on Judaic Studies, Bishop Bernard Flanagan Ecumenical Lecture, Saint Marie-Eugenie Milleret Lecture, and Saint Thomas More Lecture. The Institute also sponsors occasional programs such as the Paideia Colloquium for faculty, and various other colloquia honoring the life and work of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Leo Tolstoy, the 200th anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's birth, and the beatification of Blessed John Henry Newman, to name a few. Through its annual lectureships, special programs, and collaboration with other organizations, the Institute stresses education and makes a deliberate effort to bring the best contemporary scholarship to bear on the life of the College, Church and society in our time.

2) In 1968 the College became the first Catholic college in the history of the United States to appoint a Protestant (United Church of Christ) pastor as Vice-President and Academic Dean, Dr. Oscar Remick.

3) Fr. Ernest Fortin, professor of theology, philosophy, and political science at the College and later at Boston College, played a major role in the foundation of the Ecumenical Institute and was a member of several inter-Church dialogues, such as those with the Methodists. His contributions in this area were recognized by the American government that awarded him a number of study grants in the field of world religions.

I am also aware that Fr. Armand Desautels, provincial from 1969-1975, became well-known for his ecumenical outreach in the Quebec region, especially with the Anglican Church, during his later years.