

Early on the morning of Saturday, February 21, 1863 the Phase entered the Bosphorus straits after a week's voyage across the Mediterranean Sea. It was snowing. From the ship's deck, Fr. d'Alzon and his travel companion, Louis Guizard, trained at the Assumptionist high school in Nîmes, discovered an enchanting landscape: "a city of marble....under a wide-open sky," in the words of Fr. Siméon Vailhé, the great biographer of Fr. d'Alzon. At the residence of the Patriarchal Apostolic Vicar, Msgr. Paolo Brunoni, Fr. d'Alzon received gracious hospitality. His first impressions of the city? He would write of them two days later in a letter to "his dear children" at Assumption high school (Collège de l'Assomption). "Constantinople is the most beautiful city in the world seen from afar and from the rooftops, but the streets!! Ah! It's unbelievable. People who are dirty; streets that are dirty; people on horseback continually splashing you; stagecoaches with drivers always on their feet; dead dogs; cobblestone streets that I can't possibly describe...."



So why had he decided to undertake this trip at 53 years of age? While he was on the diocesan pilgrimage of Nîmes in Rome at the end of May/the beginning of June 1862, the opinions of Fr. Jerome Kajziecwicz, superior general of the Resurrectionists, and of various friends in Rome brought Fr. d'Alzon to shift the focus of his plans in the Near East from Palestine and Lebanon to Constantinople and Bulgaria. The public papal audience with Pius IX on June 5 where the latter blessed "his works in the East and in the West" and the private audience the following day confirmed his change of mind: there was need to attack the "Photian schism" as a whole. This idea was dear to Msgr. Brunoni, who dreamed as well, perhaps, that Fr. d'Alzon's generosity might help to reduce the enormous debts of his diocese. The whole matter demanded a trip to Constantinople.

Fr. Galabert had arrived there on December 30, 1862. From the very beginning he had placed himself at the service of the local church in different ways. Preaching took up a lot of his time. The day after his arrival, the First Sunday of Lent, in the cathedral of St. John Chrysostom, he began a series of sermons, three a week until Easter. Various religious congregations (the French Christian Brothers, the Vincentians, the daughters of St. Vincent de Paul, the Sisters of Sion) all asked him to preach to their students. Many visits and a ton of correspondence filled the rest of his free time. "Yesterday I went to see in her sickbed," he wrote on February 2 to the Children of Mary of the Assumption in Nîmes, "the mother superior of the of the Sisters of St. Vincent de Paul, who was in terrible pain (…) She was responsible for a convent where thirty-three of her sisters had already died at the service of those suffering from cholera during the Crimean War. She and her sisters had buried 17,000 French soldiers, even before the first cannon shot had been fired near Sebastopol."



His humor colored his remarks: "I preach twice a day in an empty auditorium," he wrote on March 24. "When it drizzles in Constantinople, everyone stays home. When it rains, people shiver at the horror of having to touch their noses on the windowpanes of their homes. The women make themselves a sort of chicken cage on the balconies of the second floor. There they stretch out on their mattresses and, when they have the strength, they look up now and again. Every house features one of these little sanctuaries of 'softness' decorated in Greek or Turkish motifs or whatever else catches their fancy."



Fr. Galabert spent a lot of time making contact with numerous individuals holding authority in the various churches and in society, such as Most Rev.Hassoun, bishop of Armenian Catholics, Mr. Pierre Baragnon, an alumnus of the collège in Nîmes and editor of the French language paper in the city, the *Journal de Constantinople*, held in high esteem by local authorities. He was received by Fuad Pacha and had an audience with Ali Pacha, the Grand Vizier. All of this gave him an insight into the complex reality of the country as well as ways in which to answer concrete questions posed to him. At Msgr. Brunoni's request, he began to study the diverse aspects of the situation in Bulgaria, such as that of the eparchy (diocese) of Sistovo, which was requesting reunification with Rome, the machinations of the nationalists, and the danger of dangling material benefits which could unduly influence religious sentiment. All these factors would require careful discernment. His numerous contacts with the Bulgarians in Istanbul gave him a deeper knowledge of this people, their religious ignorance, but also their good-heartedness. One of the first impressions he came to: one had to reach out to the younger generations and open schools; teaching and education would form and open minds and hearts. It was the success that various schools sponsored by religious congregations were already having that convinced him of this. Having visited Bulgaria lands from March 10 to April 2, Fr. Galabert conveyed to Fr. d'Alzon an urgent request of the bishop of Philippopoli. In his turn, Fr d'Alzon would write a week later to Fr. Picard, "It is probable that Fr. Galabert will build a school in Philippopoli in the next five or six months." He added, "Hopefully this school will allow us to begin preparing some good vocations."

Here is a second strong conviction that he had: the Eastern churches united to Rome must have a well-formed clergy morally, intellectually, and spiritually, in their own rite."Obviously there is need for a seminary here...a center of apostolic and scholarly action. That, it seems to me, should be one of the goals of our congregation" (letter of March 16 to Fr. Vincent de Paul Bailly). He even foresaw where it would be, in Chalcedon (modern Kadikoy, on the Asian shores of Constantinople): the prices were affordable; it offered the memory of the Fourth Ecumenical Council; the site was of superior quality. All of these factors argued in its favor. Fr. d'Alzon visited the site himself on March 2 and again on April 15 with Msgr. Brunoni, who was already at his country house. Eventually (1895) the Holy See gave the Assumptionists this "palazzo" which would house a Greco-Bulgarian seminary, the cradle of the Institute of Byzantine Studies.

Fr. d'Alzon's trip came to an end on April 16. Out of love for the Church he committed himself more than ever to an end to division, to unity. Certainly, his thinking had the limits of its time; unity could only be thought of in terms of "a return of the dissident Easterns" to the Roman fold. And to be sure, not all of his ideas bore fruit immediately. The seminary did not open immediately and, unfortunately, would fail in the long run. However, his insistence on the need to provide a serious formation in the Oriental rite to Greek and Bulgarian clergy contributed to opening the way of unity launched thirty years later by Pope Leo XIII and to bringing the Latin West to discover and appreciate anew the wealth of the rites and spirituality of the Eastern churches, ignored for so long. It was a period of discovery, a necessary conversion that the Latin Catholic Church had to undertake and that would help to bring it, one century later, to the ecumenism of Vatican II.

At the end of 1863, Fr. d'Alzon was recollecting his thoughts in a series of reflections called "Notes intimes" ("Most Personal Thoughts"). On December 23, he wrote, "God seems to be making his will known. Our congregation has its work cut out for it: the reunion of the Eastern Church, the fight against the schism; this implies above all a spirit of humility and charity that counters whatever spirit of pride and division that is tearing apart the robe of Christ. We must foster a love for unity and obedience to the head of the Church. What we must do is to study Eastern languages, their Church history, their rites, their canon law, their theology." As a matter of fact, this became the program that characterized Assumptionist houses of formation for a long time.

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