

By Fr. John Franck, A.A.

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First Vows
Feast of the Transfiguration
Assumption College, Worcester

Bishop McManus, fellow Assumptionists and members of the wider Assumption family, both religious and lay, Cristian, Eddy, Hoang, German, Renju, Ryan, friends one and all.

A couple of months ago I received the June issue of my favorite magazine, *National Geographic* , and quickly turned to the featured article entitled “The New Explorers: The Mystery of Risk” and subtitled “Risk-taking: Why do we do it?”

The author goes on to claim that (quote), “risk underlies any journey into the unknown, whether it’s a ship captain’s voyage into uncharted seas, a scientist’s research of dangerous diseases, or an entrepreneur’s investment in a new venture.” (unquote)

And yes, perhaps some disciples’ choice to climb an isolated mountain in galilee with their Master, or even six young men’s pledge to commit their lives to God by listening to a message spoken in the deepest recesses of their heart, to, as our Rule of Life says, “risk their whole lives in the adventure of encountering God.”

The *National Geographic* article goes on to speak of the likes of Christopher Columbus and his intrepid search for a passage to the Indies, John Wesley Powell's unprecedented exploration of the hostile labyrinths of the Grand Canyon, and so many other explorers of the past, not to mention their modern counterparts who plumb the undiscovered depths of the ocean or seek the outer reaches of space.

But then, disappointingly, I have to admit, I read the alleged motivation for such risk-taking according the author ---- a high level of the chemical dopamine flowing in their veins. Really? I quote, "It is dopamine that compels human beings to move forward, controlling motor skills and driving individuals to extremes" (unquote).

Perhaps we could have one of *National Geographic's* neuropsychologists test the autoreceptors in these novices' brains to see whether they have a sufficient level of the chemical necessary for the risk they are about to take. That would certainly make things easier for their novice-master's evaluation.

My dear novices, you are about to embark on a true adventure --- one whereby you will become the sons and heirs of Emmanuel d'Alzon. And if his own life is an example, an adventure yours will be, too --- but not without significant risks, as he himself knew only too well.



First of all, there were the not inconsequential risks he took by virtue of shunning the aristocratic status of his family and the powerful fortune that he would inherit, a fortune that would easily establish him as a man of noble standing and public influence. As I mentioned to the novices a week or so ago on their pre-profession retreat, I was never more impressed with the extraordinary legacy that d'Alzon that d'Alzon turned his back on than I did three years ago when leading a pilgrimage in his footsteps on the occasion of the bicentennial of his birth. On

that pilgrimage we found ourselves one day standing on the terrace of the once stunning chateau of Lavagnac where d'Alzon spent his childhood and where he would return regularly throughout his life. This aristocratic residence, which his sister inherited, was once described as the Versailles of the southern France.

Standing on that terrace, wherever you looked ---- to the north, to the south, the east or the west, whatever your eyes could take in belonged to the d'Alzon estate ----- 3,000 acres of lush vineyards, lush orange groves, stately poplars and shady chestnut trees, whole forests actually, teeming with wildlife, and even with a river running through it, the Herault. All of it belonged to the d'Alzon family and all of it, and much more elsewhere, did d'Alzon stand to inherit one day as the eldest child and only son.



Life at the chateau not only suited the refined taste of this patrician family --- the private tutors, the corps of servants, the prestigious visitors, the wonderful library d'Alzon's well-bred father had collected, but such a life also prepared the brilliant and ambitious young d'Alzon for an illustrious career befitting his blue-blooded ancestry ---------- a politician like his father in the House of Representatives, a diplomat like his brother-in-law, Anatole de Puysegur, a judge, or even a military leader like one of his other relatives, someone who could restore the erstwhile glory of his beloved France.

But just as he was to sacrifice the genteel and privileged life at Lavagnac, so, too, was he to renounce the almost guaranteed life of prestige and power in French society in one of the careers his family ties would easily occasion.

And this latter decision was even more difficult for the young d'Alzon than would at first meet the eye. Let me explain. I would invite you to listen to the lively interchange between the nineteen-year old d'Alzon and his best friend, Luglien de Jouenne d'Esgrigny, four years his elder and a fellow law student in Paris, who was to become the distinguished editor of several

popular newspapers and reviews, such as *Le Correspondant* and *L'Univers* (*The Universe*). These two spiritual giants of 19th century France were brought together by the exceptional Abbe Felicite de Lamennais, that brilliant and captivating, reform-minded priest in post-Revolutionary France who attracted the likes of Henri Lacordaire, who would re-found the Dominicans in France, Dom Prosper Gueranger, who would oversee the resurrection of the famed Benedictine monastery of Solesmes, and Charles de Montalembert, one of the greatest Catholic apologists of the century.

In the wake of the devastation and persecution the Church faced after the French Revolution, about this Lamennais argued that the only thing that could regenerate European society was a recognition of the rights of God and the authority and freedom of the Church of Rome. But interestingly, for his age, Lamennais strongly emphasized not only the essential need for a new brand of Churchmen but also the absolute necessity of an avant-garde Catholic laity, fully instructed in the faith and involved in this new world.

D'Alzon, as I said, barely having turned 19, wrote to his friend Luglien to share with him the most intimate thoughts of his soul, that he was seriously thinking of giving up his family legacy and an influential lay career and pursuing a religious vocation.

The response of his friend was immediate and brutally straightforward with little subtlety. On January 23, 1830, he wrote to d'Alzon, "You, a priest? No! You are not made to be a priest. I can't tell you how much pain such an idea gives me. You have to think about this more, I beg you. Don't jump into things and don't fool yourself. Let me tell you the truth. You would have a thousand times more influence for good by avoiding the priest's robe. I know you. I know what you're worth. Believe me, your mission, one that is also beautiful and, above all, one that will get results, is to be an honest man among other men. Your example in the world would be more useful than your example among other priests."

Yes, this was his best friend and one who would stay so throughout his life.

So, when I say that there was a lot at risk when d'Alzon chose to pursue a religious vocation, I am talking, yes, about the good life he could have had at Lavagnac, and, yes, a position of prestige and power, but also a critical position as an influential lay reformer at the side of like-minded friends and colleagues like d'Esgrigny.

D'alzon didn't dally with a response to his friend. It came a day later --- equally frank and unambiguous. "I see that you're hardly willing to listen to reason. Do I scare you in a priest's robes? Why is this idea so repugnant to you?

You know that already at the age of eleven or twelve I decided to consecrate myself to the defense of the faith. Yes, to be sure, I have considered many careers --- the army, the rostrum, the Chamber. But little by little this has all disappeared and I am resolved to consecrate myself totally to God --- for I no longer feel any attachment to the world….."

Three months later, in another letter to his friend, he would add, " My dear friend, I am more and more convinced every day, and tonight more than ever, that there is no happiness except in religion and the full practice of religion.
How faith makes intelligence grow and how charity enlarges one's heart! One must take up one's cross an d one must carry it and not drag it behind oneself, for if we do not use it as a support, as a brace, it will necessarily crush us as a tiresome weight we cannot get rid of."

So it was that d'Alzon took the ultimate risk of sacrificing so much his world had to offer and consecrating his entire life to God.

Did d'Alzon take such an enormous risk because his body overflowed with exceptional reserves of for the dopamine?

Hardly! Listen to what he would say to another good friend, Marie Eugenie, the foundress of the Religious of the Assumption. "We live in a century that makes gods of men and denies the rights of God. Re-establishing these rights is such a worthwhile enterprise that it could fill a lifetime."

And so it did for the founder whose sons you become today.

My dear friends, you will become his true sons and heirs when you, too, are willing to risk all in

re-establishing God's rights in the world, to heed the voice calling from heaven, "This is my beloved Son, 'Listen to him,' to, as our Rule says most poignantly, "to embrace the great causes of God and go wherever God is threatened in Man and Man is threatened as image of God." This enterprise can fill a lifetime.