
Father Emmanuel d'Alzon (1810-1880)

Like Augustine, overlooking the ruins of Hippo

Fr. d'Alzon was approaching the end of his life in the year 1880. It was a time in France when the future appeared particularly bleak for the Church and religious congregations (especially because of the Ferry Law which restricted teaching possibilities for the Church and for religious congregations and threatened the existence of "unauthorized" religious congregations). Fr. d'Alzon had a sense that his death was near. On August 10, he wrote to Mother Marie-Eugénie once again: "It's 3 PM and I am about to begin a 15-day retreat to get me ready for my 70th birthday. After which...." He left this last phrase unfinished. The prior of the Carthusian monastery of Valbonne in the Gard, Dom Vaulchier, where he made a second retreat in September, said of him, "I believe that Fr. d'Alzon, like all souls advanced in the ways of God, had a single focus, namely, whatever could serve to glorify God and sanctify souls.

He worried little about human judgment." Fr. d'Alzon would make yet another retreat with his religious, novices, and postulants; it ended with the taking of the habit and he had his photo taken in their midst. His powerful figure occupies the center of the group; one sees him with his cowl covering his head and from his face with its austere traits ravaged by age and suffering, there emanates a profound impression of sadness and exhaustion. You would have thought that he was 10 years older than he actually was. The uncertainty shrouding the fate of his religious soon to be exiled to England and Spain explains somewhat the fears reflected in his face. His strength was in inexorable decline and, on October 11, after saying Mass, he took to his bed. The end of Fr. d'Alzon's life makes one think of that of Augustine, distressed at the prospect of the destruction of Roman civilization by the Barbarian invasion. The old warrior of Nîmes had the same feeling of powerlessness in the face of new forces, political and republican, which intended to build a French society emancipated from clerical and ecclesial influences.

Farewell to his Congregations

During the course of the following weeks, he seemed to rally somewhat, but here was an old

man, worn out, who was wrestling with death. Dr. Combal was guardedly optimistic, but did not give him any false assurances, “Your health is like broken capital.” Fr. d’Alzon replied, laughing, “I’ve broken enough things in the past; I am certainly capable of breaking that as well.” In turn he received Mother Correnson, Mother Marie Eugénie, the foundress of the Religious of the Assumption, who had come expressly from Auteuil, and his Assumptionist brothers present in Nîmes or those who had come down from Paris, for a last encounter. At the end of this month of October all were awaiting the brutal implementation of the decrees of expulsion of religious. The Jesuits had already paid the price; the neighboring monastery of Saint-Michel de Frigolet had undergone a veritable military siege. The Collège de l’Assomption was guarded day and night by the alumni association. However, a number of interventions, especially that of Bishop Besson to the president of the Republic himself, Jules Simon, resulted in a delay of the government’s occupation of the premises, out of respect for this great religious who was dying.

The account of his farewells to his religious was recorded by Fr. Emmanuel Bailly, the superior of the Collège at Nîmes and provincial of southern France, in moving terms; they have been reproduced in the Ecrits Spirituels: “My dear brothers, you know that next to God and the Blessed Virgin you are the ones that I loved the most in the world. Soon we will separated. Submitting to God’s will; he is our Master.... There are many good religious who are not here; my heart reaches out to them as well.”

After an agony which lasted six days without a word of complaint on his lips and which did not deprive him of consciousness for even a moment, Fr. d’Alzon went to his rest in silence, profoundly and intimately united with God, around noon, at the sound of the Angelus, on November 21, 1880. Bishop Besson, his bishop, presided over the funeral rites, the following Thursday, the 24th, in the presence of an enormous congregation, estimated to be 30,000 people. A great man, a soldier of God, had just left the battle-field; but his sons and daughters, although small in number, were ready to pick up where he left off and, confident, to face the future with the spirit of their founder in view of the coming of God’s Kingdom.

Where Assumption Was Involved

Full of foresight., Fr. d’Alzon had organized the Congregation of the Assumptionists into three provinces in 1876: Paris, Nîmes, and Andrinopolis (the Eastern Mission). If he had finally submitted his resignation as Vicar General of Nîmes in 1878 (a service he had rendered for 40 years), it was in view of dedicating himself more fully to the animation and organization of his religious congregations. In 1875, he had launched still another magazine, L’Assomption, to draw the interest of generous lay-people to his apostolic and missionary involvements: the high-school seminaries (alumnates), the press, pilgrimages, the work of Our Lady of Vocations, and the Eastern Mission where, under the steady hand of Fr. Galabert, Assumptionists and Oblates of the Assumption worked side by side. During the last year of his life, Fr. d’Alzon was eager to collaborate, by his homilies, in the success of Le Pèlerin which had begun an illustrious career, one whose longevity was hard to imagine at that point. Very quickly there was added to this weekly a popular supplementary sheet, The Lives of the Saints, which would eventually become a separate review. It was during that same year, 1880, that d’Alzon elaborated with certain religious in Paris, François Picard and Vincent de Paul Bailly, a project for an inexpensive popular newsheet, something which the Bonne Presse was going to realize after

his death. His contributions to the original formula, Croix-Revue, tried to recall the rights and liberties of the Church, threatened by legislation in France. Lively articles on his part drove home his thought imbued with a seamless ultramontanism and with a neuralgic anti-liberalism.(N.B. “liberalism” in its post-French Revolution understanding of the word). During the summer of 1880 d’Alzon found every opportunity available to show his solidarity with all those religious who had become victims of government power in France. But it was only in 1883, three years after his death, that there would be born the daily newspaper La Croix, which benefited from the death of Louis Veuillot, editor of L’Univers. Until the very end d’Alzon knew how to engrave his mark on the apostolic works of the Assumption, all the while in concert with his religious in Paris (chiefly involved in the press and pilgrimages), in Nîmes, and in the East. Even if time would see new orientations unfold with various manifestations, succeeding generations of Oblates and Assumptionists continued to walk in the footsteps of the founder in hastening the coming of Kingdom of God thanks to his spirit of generosity and inventiveness. The past does not confine the present, but it does remain the guarantee of the future. It is not particular works, founded or nor during Fr. d’Alzon’s lifetime, that Assumption is called to extend in time, but the permanence of a spirit which invites its sons and daughters to a journey on the roads of today’s men and women and at the service of the Church, at all times and in every place.

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