

By Fr. Oliver Blanchette, A.A.

“Every century has its own vices, we must above all have the virtues that are contrary to these vices. It is in this sense that we must belong to our times”. These words of Emmanuel d’Alzon prompt me to offer congratulations to Fr. Julio, postulator for the cause of beatification of Fr. d’Alzon, for choosing to speak in the present and coming issues of the “Signs of God” and in this Year of Faith, of the faith of our founder. There is a crying need for Catholics to deepen their faith. There is a crying need in our country for men and women who live out their faith so that it affects all society for the common good. That’s why, in part at least, we are having this Year of Faith. This offers us a powerful reason for speaking of Fr. d’Alzon’s faith and of showing how it was precisely our founder’s faith, deeply personal yet very public, that made him a man of his times. In turn, this invites us, if we wish to really be men and women of our times, to seek in Emmanuel d’Alzon an example of living faith, for both our personal lives and in our more public lives as members of the body of Christ, the Church, and as active citizens of our country. And, of course, we hope that this will also advance The Good Cause of Emmanuel d’Alzon’s beatification.

Fr. d’Alzon surely was a man of his times, bringing to it above all the example of his fiery faith so contrary to all the French Revolution stood for. The Revolution’s motto was “Liberty, Fraternity, Equality.” Unfortunately, these fundamental principles of democracy were accompanied by the denial of God, enemy, in the eyes of the revolutionaries, of all true liberty. Fr. D Alzon was, on the contrary, a man of profound faith in God, who had given to his Congregation the motto “Thy Kingdom Come “ and a man who fought valiantly, ceaselessly to establish that Kingdom in the minds and hearts of the men and women of his time And this in a country where just a few years earlier the bloody revolution had tried to replace the true God by the Goddess of Reason.

If our century has a fundamental weakness might it not well be found ultimately, though in a different way, in that same lack of faith? *Benedict XVI* spoke often of the relativism that pervades much of modern day society, that attitude of believing there is no fundamental truth, no absolute truth and that one was free to think and do as one pleased as long as it did not directly interfere with the neighbor's rights. Pope Francis, for his part, deplores the fact that so many of us are content with being producers and consumers and simply living on that solely human, horizontal and ultimately less than human level. We need to reach out to the absolute, transcendental; there must be a vertical dimension to our life. We are made to reach up, to be lifted up by someone greater than ourselves. It's the only way to be fully human and not to cheat ourselves. That is why Fr.d'Alzon, a man of such profound faith, can serve as model of what we of the early 21st century are possibly most in need of, Faith. And that is why it's important not simply for Assumptionists but for all people of good will, that this faith of Fr. D'Alzon be better known. If this were to happen it could also hasten the beatification of our founder, which, in turn, could well be a blessing not only for Catholics but for many others. Here, then, are a few thoughts concerning the faith of Emmanuel d'Alzon.

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" With these words Viscount Henri D'Alzon introduced his infant son Emmanuel to the world, striking omen of the trajectory of his son's life. isgifts. I Emmanuel was what we today call, a ''Cradle Catholic.'' But, unlike too many "Cradle Catholics" of today his trajectory, set by God and with the cooperation of loving, wise and faith-filled parents, remained steadily on course. All the more remarkable is this since d'Alzon was one of the most public figures of his day. And we know how challenging to our faith is public life and especially engagement with the political life. All that, however, will be very much part of the life of our founder. So to face such a challenge the foundations, as Jesus warned us, must be built on rock and not on sand. But just what was this rock, the foundation of all that the young d'Alzon was and was to become? Fr. Andre Seve in his book "Christ is my Life –The Spiritual Legacy of Emmanuel d'Alzon explains: "Once Emmanuel d'Alzon was ordained a priest and settled down in Nimes, he was obsessed by one question: "For what kind of a world am I a priest? What is to be done so that God may reign in that world?" And Seve, answering that question writes: out "He saw his century turning completely to rationalism , proclaiming atheism and calling ''free thought" an aggressive counter- faith. Being a man for whom God was at the center of his thought and of his life, he could never accept a society in which one could not speak in lofty terms of praise about God, … everywhere people lived , everywhere the common people breathed.'' The rock upon which Emmanuel built his life was Faith. Only eighteen, Emmanuel who delighted in true friendships wrote, as Fr. Seve again tells us: " And it's that, most often, we seek friendship only in man; for our hearts do not know how to gravitate toward the eternal center of infinite love; for we do not know , that to love, we must believe in the word of God. May these poor souls, so sick, listen to this word, which alone can help them in warming them; only there will they learn to love, and to love with a love with no regrets.'' Remarkable as was this faith of a teen-ager, Fr. Seve wisely points out how it was in need of purification, of a firmer foundation than even his own tender heart and will of steel could offer. The twenty year old Emmanuel wrote: "I shall work hard to know myself, to be master of myself, and then I can easily fashion myself into what I want to be."(Idem)

In 1850's he suffered several setbacks: vocations to his young Congregation were few, there were severe financial problems and, above all, there was severe illness. This crisis, lasting for several years, abruptly challenged the too great self-assurance and successes of Fr. D'Alzon . He learned in the school of suffering the need to count not on one's self but on God alone; he would learn acceptance , indeed abandonment to God's will. During this crisis he wrote to Marie- Eugenie: "The night of faith appears to me like an abyss into which we must plunge, holding the Cross and accepting all the Cross teaches and signifies." (E.S. p.814) But above all he would learn the need of Christ's love. He would learn that faith to be alive and fruitful had to find its strength in Christ's love. It was then that d'Alzon was able to say: "Christ is My Life". And it was then that he felt compelled to add to the first motto of his Congregation: "Thy Kingdom Come", a second motto: "For the Love of Jesus Christ." Yet this primary place of love in the life of our founder is only possible because he has come to believe and to know Jesus so well. And the only way to know Jesus is to study His life but to do so not only through the power of human reason but above all and necessarily with the eyes of Faith. Without faith we cannot know Jesus, we cannot know God. So d'Alzon will never cease telling himself: "I must know, believe in Jesus to love Him and my love must lead to deeper belief, study and knowledge so that I can love Him all the more. " All this leads us to the conclusion that our Founder's whole life was lived at the level of faith, but a faith rooted in trust and especially love of God through Jesus, the Way, the Truth and the Life, at the level then of the theological virtues that always kept him in touch with God.. No small wonder then that we speak of his Faith-Love as governing his whole life.

But always these theological virtues would demand that he deepen his Faith by knowing Jesus better. In the early 1860's he wrote the Directory, a manual to guide Assumptionists in their personal spiritual journey. At the very beginning is this cry of Faith: "As a religious I am especially called to be the servant of Jesus- Christ , and all the affections of my heart, all the powers of my being must tend toward him; that is my life :" Christ is my life." And to the very end this faith- love of Fr. d'Alzon would always lead to action. Not surprising then that the last weeks of his life alternate between his struggle to build the Kingdom of God and preparing for death which he felt was fast approaching. The last article he wrote to defend the rights of God against the heresy of "the sovereignty of man against God'', appeared to come from an athlete who, just before reaching the goal , increases his pace with an all-out burst of effort. " (Emmanuel d'Alzon by Gaetan Bernoville, p.212) But, finally, he will occupy himself only with preparing for death, making not one but 3 retreats! Only then did he feel ready to face death. And this he will do with serenity, patience and courage even as agents of the government ready to brutally expel and exile the Assumptionists are fortunately kept away by a last minute appeal of the Bishop to the President of France.. After confessing himself, asking pardon of his brother religious, he will tell them that after Jesus, Mary and the Church they are the ones he most loved on this earth, Then, as the Angelus Bells rang at noon on November 21, 1880, Fr. D'Alzon with the words "My Jesus" on his lips returned to His Father, whose Kingdom he had served with such ardent and constant Faith.

And then I had a dream. I remember little of the dream, but this much I do .I dreamt of Fr.d'Alzon but he was not alone. With him were Archbishop Oscar Romero and Dorothy Day! I was not surprised that all three were in my dreams, for I know and admire all three. But I was surprised to see them together, especially Fr. D'Alzon from another era and so different. And yet, weren't their deep similarities, apart from the fact that all three are candidates for canonization? What might be unique about them is that all three fought, in different ways, publicly for the rights of man, for the rights of God. Dorothy Day represented a new type of political holiness – a way of serving Christ not only through prayer and sacrifice but through solidarity with the poor and in struggle along the path of justice and peace". (All Saints, by Robert Ellsbergh, p.519) Archbishop Romero of San Salvador became "renowned as the outstanding embodiment of the prophetic church, a voice for the voiceless."(i*dem, p.132)* He died for that cause shot to death as he celebrated Mass. Perhaps as we pray for the canonization of Dorothy Day and of Archbishop Romero so well known in our country we will be encouraged to do the same for Fr. d'Alzon

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and to pray for especially for healings though his intercession. And in doing so may we too grow in the conviction that the rights of every man and woman can never be separated from the rights of God from whom they derive. And that we are, according to the graces and gifts we have received, to stand up for these rights in prayer, in action, sometimes even publicly. Something that Emmanuel d'Alzon did as he prayed so ardently, then preached ,wrote about, fought for publicly in Church and in Society and literally wore himself out for by his amazing activity that was always rooted in his profound Faith-Love.