

From Yesterday to Today

On Christmas day 1845, in his modest boarding school in Nîmes, France, Fr. D'Alzon founded the Congregation of the Augustinians of the Assumption (The Assumptionists) and launched his dream of "penetrating society with a Christian idea", in the midst of a France still reeling under the influence of the French Revolution that had rejected God. Two days later he started a Third Order of laymen. In the latter were two married men he had persuaded to leave their positions as professors in the secular University System of the day to join his daring adventure, Jules Monnier and Eugene-Germer Durand. Both were competent teachers but also very committed Catholics.

The Third Order as conceived by Fr. d'Alzon, one in which lay people were close partners of the Religious, perhaps judged too innovative, was not accepted by Rome, but Fr. d'Alzon throughout his life remained convinced of the importance of such a group. Thus in 1874 he told his religious: "Do you not agree that a Third Order (or call it what you may) would be the answer. Assemble a group of intelligent lay people. Think of what you could do, of what you could accomplish with their cooperation: propagating Christian ideas, preparing Catholic Universities, organizing Catholic working class movements, protesting worldly ideas, fostering vocations etc."

It is not surprising then that throughout our history there have always been men and women who were our close friends, often interested in our spirituality and many times cooperating in our missions.

Indeed, some 45 years after the Council of Vatican II, that described the Church as the People of God, we may, hopefully, realize better than ever before that lay people as well as the ordained or religious, are called to holiness, each according to his/her vocation, and to build right here in our midst the "City of God". The Council was noteworthy for its realistic yet positive attitude toward the world and all of humanity as well as preoccupied with our care for nature while compassionate toward the suffering of the many, especially the poor. How well his vision of the world suits the life and the apostolate of the laity!

Today, more than ever, we need prophets. Thank God we have some. But we also need the contribution of each person. And just as technology multiplies the capacity of each one,

working together, partnership can do the same. Indeed, the Spirit that animated Vatican II seems to be calling us to do just that. One concrete sign of this is the almost universal movement among Religious Congregations toward ever fuller partnership with lay people.

The Assumptionists are no exception to this exciting adventure and such partnerships are springing up in many of the countries where we are present. We would not like to see that happen in our country. And as custodians of the Charism, the gift given to our founder Emmanuel d'Alzon for the entire Church as well as a gift for the world and as members of a world-wide institution with a long experience, we like to think that we might just have something to offer our Church and our world, as modest as that may be.

The charism that Fr. d'Alzon bequeathed to us to invite us "to choose before all else to work, out of love for Jesus Christ, for the Coming of the Reign of God in ourselves and around us." And that Reign we know is "an eternal and universal kingdom, a kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and a kingdom of justice, love and peace. And today, we might well add, a kingdom of solidarity with all people, especially the poor. But we, more than ever, like to believe that the laity has something precious to offer to help build that kingdom of God in Church and World.

Clearly the laity could multiply the strength of our Congregation and while maintaining fully its identity as people totally immersed in the world could be enriched and supported by the framework of a world-wide Congregation and especially by its life of fraternity, prayer and mission that has withstood the test of time of over 150 years existence. And this is a charism, a gift that lay men and women could enrich even as they respect the religious identity of the Congregation. Fr. Richard Lamoureux, our Superior General put it this way as he spoke to the lay people, interested in forming a Lay Alliance and present at our last General Chapter of 2005: "The charism of the Assumption is God's gift to the Church (and not simply to a group of religious and even less to a group of priests). It is not the private property of the Assumptionists religious. What does belong to them is the responsibility to care for and communicate this charism, to be sure the People of God have access to it and benefit from it.

I believe one of the consequences of that conviction is, as one or another person said yesterday our vocabulary (and more profoundly our way of thinking) needs to change.

-Assumptionists are lay people and men in the vowed life and even more the entire Assumption family (all of our sisters, as well);

-“collaboration” does not say it well enough; even “friends of the Assumption’ is not good enough, because you are the Assumption with us.

-Alliance/Covenant, that is the word we need; we are inspired by Emmanuel d’Alzon, nourished by knowledge of him and his spirit, sustained by community, challenged by and responsive to the needs of God’s people in today’s world. That is the Assumption today.

So, at Emmanuel House, two religious and a few laymen and women have been meeting to try to launch such an Alliance in our Region and in our country. We believe the time has come to open up the exciting possibility of such a Lay-Religious Alliance to more people. We begin with you today.

Thank you for listening. Please spread the word. And, if any of you have a spark of interest in this adventure we would love to have you tell us about it. Perhaps together we just might do some good that otherwise might well remain forever undone.