The Assumptionists: "More than ever we are faithful to our founder and to the Holy Father"

An Interview with Very Rev. Richard Lamoureux, A.A., Superior General of the "pioneers of the Catholic press"

ROME, Friday, February 17, 2006 (ZENIT.org) – "An Assumptionist is a man of faith and a man of his time," affirmed Rev. Richard Lamoureux, Superior General of the Assumptionists in this interview granted to Zenit.

853 members strong and 160 years old, the Augustinians of the Assumption (also known as Assumptionists) are present in 24 countries on four continents. They run Bayard Press, which publishes over 100 magazines, including "La Documentation catholique" and the daily newspaper, "La Croix." They direct "Radio Moto" in the Diocese of Beni-Butembo in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (D.R.C.) and are present in the field of education as well.

Zenit : In what context were the Assumptionists born?

Rev. Lamoureux: Let me respond to another question: "What is the Assumption?" In fact, the "Assumption" is a movement in the Church which dates its origin to the XIXth century, just after the French Revolution. You might say that the Assumptionists belong to this movement which has its roots in the experience of two individuals, namely, Blessed Marie-Eugénie de Jésus Milleret and the Venerable Emmanuel d'Alzon. Reflecting on the reality of the Church and the world of their time, they initiated, each according to his own charism to be sure, a movement within the Church which devoted itself to the essentials, that is to say to core Church doctrine. On their journey of faith they came to appreciate the Fathers of the Church, especially Augustine, and the great spiritual masters like Saints Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross.

Confronted with a society shaken to its foundations by the French Revolution, d'Alzon found in the Church a force that was able to respond to the challenge of the moment. From that time, he and Marie-Eugénie wanted to gather around themselves men and women who shared their vision. These two active, and at the same time contemplative, individuals elaborated a plan of action centered on education. It was essential to form the young. For d'Alzon. education was more effective than partisan politics in transforming society. Rather quickly, d'Alzon diversified his plan of action by adding to education various publication projects, as well as direct social work in view of transforming society at its deepest level. That is why he would always say that an Assumptionist is man of faith and of his time.

Zenit: You have been at the head of the Congregation of the Augustinians of the Assumption for the last six years. In the exercise of your mission, how have you responded to the challenges you have faced, while remaining faithful to the spirit of the founder and the current orientation of the Church?

Rev. Lamoureux: It has been my wish to help the Congregation rediscover its vocation so as to commit itself anew. To do so has meant getting to know the people, the communities, the apostolic commitments, and the socio-political and ecclesial context of the different provinces. The re-expression of our charism in view of building up apostolic communities, collaboration with lay-people who share our spirituality, awakening vocations, education, the intellectual life and the media were some of the priorities of the General Chapter of 1999 which we were able to address by means of canonical visitations, letters from the Superior General, and leadership training for Assumptionists.

The insistence that we have placed on the re-expression of the charism has been a call to unity. There was, in fact, a problem with unity in the Congregation which was growing in certain areas and not so in others. So, in promoting greater unity we encouraged more collaboration beyond provincial boundaries. Globalization required as much! Fortunately, we moved away from trying to re-express the charism in terms of a spiritual doctrine, and a new horizon came into view, one that pushed us to ask ourselves no longer “Who are we?” but “Why has God called us into existence as Assumptionists?” That is how we passed from our concern for the re-expression of the charism from 1999 to 2005 to the current concern for elaborating a Congregational project. This was in fact the major undertaking of the General Chapter of 2005 ratified.

Zenit: During the General Chapter held in May, you were re-elected for second term of six years. What are the priorities to which you wish to give greater attention?

Rev. Lamoureux: The Chapter elaborated five apostolic axes:
- ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue
- new foundations
- youth and vocations
- working for a more just world— justice and peace
- the media and teaching

More specifically, the Chapter decided on three specific priorities for the next six years: the Mission in Eastern Europe, foundations in Asia, and youth and vocation ministry. We also recognized the need to make progress, to undergo a kind of conversion, in two important areas: in our covenant between lay-people and religious and in formation for our life and mission.

The General Council and I will attempt to implement these decisions as we help all of our communities be as vital and prayerful as possible, as we encourage vigorous programs of vocation ministry and new formation initiatives, as we promote closer relations with our lay friends, and as we re-organize and consolidate current ministries and support the creation of new foundations in the Philippines, Vietnam and Togo.

Zenit: Does the "Assumption" possess any special strengths on which you can establish this plan of action?

Rev. Lamoureux: This is an important question. I have drawn attention to this point when speaking of the recent General Chapter, which gave a clear direction to the entire Congregation.

In effect, a social or religious body is in danger if it does not have a 'raison d'être' which mobilizes it and inspires courage, dedication, and initiative. I think that exists at the Assumption. The Chapter gave us the opportunity to see what is not always apparent in a community or a congregation, namely a spiritual vitality and a deep spirit of faith. At the Chapter we tried very hard to be attentive to the Spirit and to be ready to respond to the needs of the Church today. Also, we realized that in general our provinces had grown in their concern for the body in its entirety and were ready to go beyond their borders. So, a missionary spirit is one important strength that I see in the Congregation. As an indication of this I would point to the first two priorities of the Chapter: Mission and Vocations. There are many young people in the Assumption. Young people, whether in the East or the West, feel drawn to our charism. And our elder members continue to edify us by their fidelity, their faith, their interest in the mission, and often by their work. For example, I could cite Frs. Edgard C. and Oliver B. in Africa (both approaching 90), still actively involved in the mission. An Assumptionist laity also inspires us. Often it is lay-people who open new avenues, who challenge us by their dedication, their love of the charism, their zeal and their creativity. And to mention one last strength, the "Assumption" possesses a very solid spiritual doctrine. Its charism, equally quite rich, can nourish men and women apostles, in every place and time. So, in spite of the challenges, there is reason to hope.

Zenit: In your recent circular letters, you often quote His Holiness Benedict XVI. What secret have you found in his writings?

Rev. Lamoureux: Benedict XVI is an "event" in the life of the Church. We are sons of the Church, encouraged by our founder to have a special love for her. Therefore we cannot remain indifferent with regard to him. What's more, when I read him, I find that he gives the most profound explanations to existential questions. According to him, the world needs a sense of meaning. As St. Augustine says, God is the only Being who can satisfy us and who, as the Holy Father says, can help us in combating the "dictatorship of relativism." He is Augustinian in his inspiration. It is true that he wrote his doctoral dissertation on St. Augustine and worked at the "Etudes augustiniennes" research center, established by the Assumptionists. His definition of peace in his letter for the World Day of Peace was also Augustinian. It seems only normal that someone as close to Saint Augustine and the spirit of our founder as the current Pope should also be dear to us.