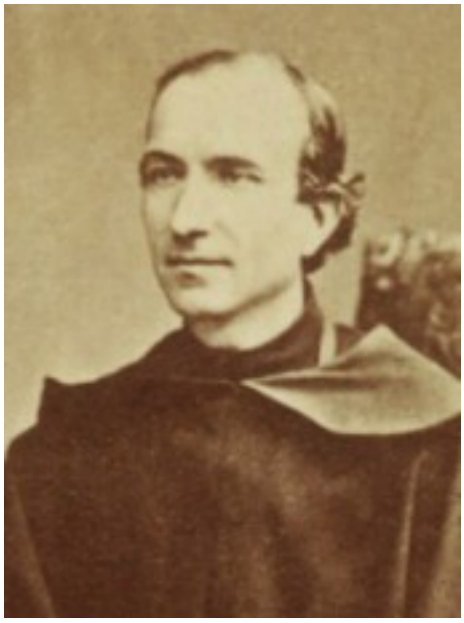


PROMINENT ASSUMPTIONIST Fr. Étienne Pernet, one of Fr. d'Alzon's first disciples and founder of the Little Sisters of the Assumption

Étienne Pernet was born on the July 23, 1824 at Vellexon, a small village in eastern France, into a Christian family, country people of humble background. His father was an agricultural laborer and also worked at the blast furnaces attached to the ironworks in the region. His mother, Magdeleine Cordelet was the village midwife. Étienne was the second of seven children, of whom only four survived.

As a child, he wanted to become a priest. He was fourteen years old when his father died. His personality was formed by his mother, a simple woman who was greatly loved in the village. In spite of the difficult financial situation they were in, his mother didn't place any obstacle in the way of his vocation and Étienne Pernet entered the seminary. He had a lively intelligence and a simple and anxious temperament.

After his first year of theology, he left the seminary for a time of reflection. He was twenty. For four years he worked as "supervisor in a school". In 1848, like so many other young country people, he found himself obliged to go to Paris to find work. There he experienced the difficulties of all those who arrive in a big city without experience, without friends, feeling homesick. At a loss, he fell ill. Every day he went to the basilica of Notre Dame des Victoires to ask for light about his vocation. He continued to question himself about what God wanted of him, and was thinking of going on mission to distant countries.

A series of events led to his meeting Mother Marie Eugenie de Jesus, foundress of the Religious of the Assumption, who suggested that he go to work at the College of Father Emmanuel d'Alzon at Nimes, who had just founded a new Congregation, the Augustinians of the Assumption. Fr. d'Alzon helped him to clarify his vocation and communicated to him his own passion for Christ and his love for the Church. Etienne found his home. In 1850, aged 26, he pronounced his first religious vows. In 1858, on April 3, he was ordained a priest. He then taught at Nîmes and looked after a club that cared for some 200 children from working-class families.

He recounted his experience:

"I've always had a love for the poor in my heart. Coming from a working-class background, my parents were rural workers, I already had some inkling of it; however, I wasn't in the family home very much. It was at Nîmes, when Fr. d'Alzon was at the height of his activity as a man initiating charitable works, that I really understood what you call "the hardships afflicting workers" and a possible response to bring to them."

On October 17, 1863, he arrived in Paris to join the Assumptionist community of the Rue François 1er. Being very simple, he entered easily into contact with people, gained the trust of all by his kindness and understanding. He heard confessions, preached and visited the sick.

More and more affected by the suffering and disarray of workers' families, especially when the mother of the family was ill, he felt an apostolic call. He thought of bringing an evangelical response to it: *"through simple acts of service, women, religious, apostles"* who would testify to the love of God among them.

It was in this context that in 1864 he met two nurses who came to ask him find work for them and some months later met M. Antoinette Fage with whom he became the bold and tenacious founder of the Congregation of the Little Sisters of the Assumption in 1865.

After spending a number of years tending to this new foundation, he was asked to go to Rome in 1870 to serve as a theologian at the First Vatican Council. Upon his arrival back in Paris he

volunteered as a military chaplain during the Franco-Prussian War, was arrested as a spy and imprisoned. After his release, he returned to a very tense Paris in 1871, suffering through the Commune uprising. Working alongside his sisters, he was arrested by partisans of the Commune and almost shot to death. He escaped when a friend intervened on his behalf explaining his work among the poor and the sick.

From 1871 to the time of his death, together with Antoinette Fage he led his new congregation and oversaw the opening of new communities in France and Europe and in 1891 crossed the Atlantic to organize the first community in the USA, in New York City.

In 1896, Fr. Pernet sought approval from Rome for the congregation. This he received in 1897.

Throughout his life, characterized by self-effacement, he worked to *"refashion a People for God"* and to bring about *"Un ity of minds in truth and union of hearts in charity"* .

After a two-day illness, he died on Easter Monday, April 3, 1899, the anniversary of his priestly ordination. Pope John Paul II declared him Venerable in 1983 and the cause for his beatification is currently underway.