

PROMINENT ASSUMPTIONIST: REV. Louis Petit (1868-1927) - Assumptionist, Scholar, Editor, Archbishop

Louis Petit was born into modest family in the Savoy region of France on February 21, 1868, the seventh of eleven children. Early on, his teachers noted his keen intelligence and prodigious memory. He joined the Assumptionists in 1885, took final vows in 1887 and was ordained a priest in 1891. From 1887 to 1894 he alternated teaching at various hug school seminaries and obtaining licentiates in philosophy and theology in Rome.

In 1895 he was sent to Turkey as the young superior of the parish of Kadikoy (ancient Chalcedon), on the Asiatic side of Istanbul, which Leo XIII had just placed in the hands of the Assumptionists. One of his first initiatives, one that would have a lasting impact, was the creation of a periodical called *Les Echos d'Orient*, whose purpose was to bring to light the riches of the Eastern Churches. An advocate of an intellectual apostolate rooted in the Eastern world, he founded a house of studies in Kadikoy that would produce many missionaries and researchers. A great lover of books and manuscripts, Fr. Louis built up a precious collection of materials. A good administrator and organizer, gifted with a quick intelligence and an assertive personality, not to mention a gift for languages, he soon made a name for himself in the world of Byzantine scholarship. As a member of the Greek Literary Society, the principal center of Hellenistic culture in Ottoman Empire, and a member of the Russian Archaeological Institute of Pera, he contributed articles to numerous dictionaries, encyclopedias, and specialized reviews. He research centered especially on the monastic and hagiographic records of ancient Byzantium. He authored volumes 37 to 46 of the famous Mansi collection, a collection of conciliar and epigraphic documents that had remained unfinished until the 18th century. This work made him a familiar, and welcome, guest at the principal Greek monasteries, including those on Mt. Athos.

When he attended the Assumptionist general chapter in Rome in 1906, he was able to establish cordial relations with Mgr. Cani, one of the curators of the Vatican Archives This contact put him in touch with Canon Martin together with whom he would undertake the mammoth project of publishing the Acts of Vatican Council I.



Given his background, he was named a consultor to the Council of the Armenian Church. In March 1912 Pope Pius X appointed him as Latin archbishop of Athens and apostolic delegate to Greece. It was the first time that an Assumptionist was elevated to the rank of bishop. This honor, which Fr. Louis considered more of a burden than an honor, interfered with his scholarly pursuits.

Scholars have pointed out the significant contributions he made in the foundation of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches and to the Pontifical Oriental Institute.

His biggest problems, however, were not administrative. They stemmed from political difficulties, both internal and external to the country: the Balkan Wars, the assassination of King Alexander, the changes in government and the coups d'états, as well as the military and diplomatic intrigues that precede and follow such upheavals, to say nothing of the religious tensions and conflicts coming from both the Orthodox majority and the Catholic minority.

After World War I, he made enormous efforts to help the Greek population expelled from Asia Minor.

In 1926, suffering from various illnesses and exhausted from his pastoral ministry, he resigned

from the See of Athens and eventually joined the Assumptionist community in Rome where he resumed his work as an editor and researcher. He died the following year, 1927, during a trip to France.

An international colloquium was held in Rome in 1997 dedicated to the life and contributions of Archbishop Petit. Scholars from various universities and centers participated: France, Belgium, Holland, Italy, and Bulgaria as well a number of important Church officials, including Archbishop Petit's successor in Athens, the apostolic vicar of Istanbul, and Cardinal Silvestrini, the head of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches. The acts of the colloquium were published by the Pontifical Oriental Institute in 2002. The papers in this volume, several by fellow Assumptionists, throw new light on Archbishop Petit's life and ministry and examine his scholarly work in detail. There are essays on his contributions to Byzantine and Balkan church history (V. Tapkova-Zaimova), liturgical studies (E. Velkovska), and Eastern theology (D. Stiernon), his editing of the acts of eastern councils and Vatican Council I for new volumes of Mansi (A. Melloni), his period as editor of *Les Échos d'Orient* (E. Fouilloux), and his correspondence with the Bollandist Hippolyte Delehaye (B. Joassart). The remarkable story of how Petit's formidable collection of books and manuscripts found its way into the Vatican Library is also presented. The full title of the publication: *Mgr Petit, Assomptionniste, fondateur des "Échos d'Orient", archevêque latin d'Athènes (1868-1927).* Actes du Colloque. Rome, 15-17 déc. 1997, edited by Fr. Bernard Holzer, A.A.