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Collaboration between Religious and Laity

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Introduction

Emmanuel d'Alzon, our Founder, was enthusiastic about the great causes of his time and rooted in the thought of Saint Augustine. He dreamed of an Assumption composed of laypersons and religious who would bring the passion for the Kingdom of God to the world of his day. Today, 150 years later, we realize his intuition is completely up-to-date and we adopt it as our own.

These are the words of our last General Chapter, addressing the laypersons who share in the Assumption's work. They summed up the essentials of an orientation voted for earlier, since it retained the collaboration between the religious and the laity which was perceived as a gift of the Spirit and as one of the missionary priorities for the entire congregation.

On two occasions, in 1987 and 1993, the General Chapter sought to promote this collaboration. Such insistence repeated within six years' time, bears witness to a decisive commitment. It is the purpose of this Letter to say it once more. It will not repeat the Chapter's texts, but it will be inspired by them and refer to them. It will not go further into the major documents on the vocation and mission of the laity in the Church provided in the great Constitutions of Vatican Council II, John Paul II's Apostolic Exhortation, *Christi fideles laici*, or into the directives of the continental bishops' Conferences (Santo Domingo, the African Synod...).

This Letter seeks simply to arouse our energy, reactivate our dynamism, and open up new paths of action. Certainly, we are not starting from scratch. The collaboration between the religious and the laity, just beginning in one place and very vigorous in another, is one of the most manifest fruits of the Spirit in the Assumption. But age, wear and tear, lethargy perhaps prevent us from seeing, hearing, imagining, in short from going farther. In the areas of co-responsibility and of works achieved in common, certain Congregations have made decisive steps forward. Why haven't we?

We tend spontaneously to see the churches of various countries in the image of our own, the church in our own land. Let us begin by being willing to extend our vision beyond our own country. Granted, the vocation of the lay Christian is fundamentally the same everywhere under the sun, but it takes very diverse forms according to cultures, churches, and activities. The same hold true at the Assumption where the teaming up of religious and laity has been a constituent element from the start because these two poles are so completely inseparable. Have they remained linked throughout our history? It seems that they have worked more or less closely over the years, but for the past decades the trend has been in both directions without becoming a vital reality for either the religious or the laity. Is it not possible to be bolder, to imagine new things without being more naive or overly utopian?

I. EACH CHURCH GOES FORWARD AT ITS OWN PACE

“During the twenty years since the Council, considerable progress has been made by the laity and with the laity. The situation has changed greatly.” So states a report on the Churches of Asia. The same report also states:

Dialogue, sharing, co-responsibility are words we use on a regular basis, but we can affirm today that the greater number of lay people do not share walk and do not dialogue with the clergy, and that they do not seek to participate in the responsibility of ecclesial work carried out in fraternal sharing.

Are these contradictory statements? Not at all. There is no doubt that much progress has been made, but there is still a long way to go.

Vatican II: Three Small Revolutions

In a well-hierarchized Church society, the laity could play only secondary roles or be mere supernumeraries. Theologically speaking, the laity came of age only with Vatican II. Pastorally speaking, at least in certain countries, some by Catholic Action movement had already put their foot in the door and challenged ways of thinking that were deemed inadequate. This surge of vital forces shattered overly narrow structures. Vatican II, with its global vision of the Church which conformed more closely to the Bible and to the Church Fathers we abet to acknowledge the rightful place of the laity. Three small revolutions sufficed for this:

1) Baptism is the common denominator of all Christians. Our differences must not cause us to forget our common heritage. Holiness is not reserved for a few, for all the baptized are called to holiness.

2) Human history in its diversity and complexity is not foreign to God's plan. Yet although the Bible yields the last word on all things, it does not have an answer to everything. It points out the direction, but the path to follow is not laid out. The Bible is in no sense a catalogue of solutions for overcoming political, economic, and tribal tensions and difficulties. The Gospel can inspire quite different plans for society, as well as varied solutions to a concrete difficulty. The Church, as the depositary of the Gospel, does not for all that provide a model of society that is

guaranteed to succeed. It does not have special competence in monetary policy or in educational systems. The Church proclaims the criteria for authentic solutions, and challenges others as blind alleys. For the Church cannot proclaim Jesus Christ the Savior without morally purifying society with the spirit of the Gospel.

3) The laity do not have a second-rate vocation or a fire sale mission. This vocation and this mission are no less demanding than others that are often held up as models.

The laity are called...by God so that by exercising their proper function and being led by the spirit of the Gospel they can work for the sanctification of the world from within, in the manner of leaven. In this way they can make Christ known to others, especially by the testimony of a life resplendent in faith, hope, and charity (Lumen Gentium, 31).

The Council spoke very dearly. Its word has been fairly well echoed and has not remained a dead letter. It has borne fruit. Many laypersons have become aware of their vocation in fidelity to the demands of their baptism. As a result, communities have gradually made changes in their celebrations, in the sharing of responsibilities, and in their external organization.

Paradoxically, service of the Christian community has inspired more than has a Christian commitment of a professional or social nature. This service offers, indeed, a whole gamut of possibilities adapted to each one's capacities, ranging from menial tasks of all sorts to catechetical and pastoral activities. In many countries, to cite but one example, the parish is no longer what it once was by reason of the active participation of many parishioners.

Three Decisive Elements

This is not the case everywhere. We do not pass in the space of one day from a Church relinquished to "the men of God" to a Church of partners involved in the adventure of Jesus Christ! Clerics are not won over from the start to such a change. They can resist as much as the laity, and sometimes more. In lands that have been Christian for centuries, traditional habits and images are deeply rooted, whether one attends church or not. And too often younger Churches have inherited these attitudes.

It is the Spirit who gives permanence to the Church, provides it with charisms and ministries, and preserves it in unity and communion. The eternal rejuvenation of the Church, involving respect and complementarity of vocations all called to holiness, a gift of God. It is not the product of erudite reckoning or complicated strategies. The fact remains that this movement toward real co-responsibility can be hampered or accelerated by current circumstances, the dominant model of the Christian community, and-what concerns us here-by the predominant type of relationship between the religious and the laity. There are, then, three decisive elements that can call for a threefold conversion on our part.

Environmental Factors

Prevalent relationships of authority in the family and in society as a whole impact on the Church. Relations between the leaders and the people in the great religions, between pastors and faithful in the various Christian denominations, whether Orthodox or Protestant, also have an impact on the same relations within the Catholic Church. This is evident in Asia, and in Africa, as well as in Europe. Are we aware of this?

As religious, as priests, we must play our role, neither more nor less, In order to let the laity play their role. Don't we need to return tirelessly to the clear and strict evangelical command: follow the example of Jesus and not the example of the mighty ones of this world, in exercising authority in the Church?

The Model of the Christian Community

In Europe during the last century every Catholic village, even the smallest, had its church and its pastor. There were enough priests to attend to the needs of the faithful. Faithful and devout laity devoted themselves to various good works. They were quite small changes.

This not so distant era is sometimes spoken of in nostalgic terms as an unsurpassable success. There are those who dream about it and wish they could restore it to life. But would they not, by the same token, sacrifice the upward thrust of the laity and their specific mission in the Church? To some extent, the priests and the many religious suffice for the task at hand. The laity are then relegated to subordinate tasks and do not attain their full stature as baptized Christians. For the services they can render—catechesis, initiation to the sacraments—are not

supplementary ministries for lack of priests. That is genuinely one of the aspects of their mission as laypersons.

Africa and Latin America have never had such an abundance of priests: the parishes are spread out, subdivided into sectors and villages; communications are difficult. As a result, certain laypersons play a decisive role. In Africa the catechist is often the coordinator of the Christian laity, the person in charge of the secondary chapel, the one who spiritually animates the community, the director of catechetics for the children and those preparing to marry. In South America the members of the basic church communities help one another to celebrate their faith and to incarnate it in daily life without the regular help of a priest. Thus, the layperson plays an active role, and his or her responsibility is more discernible.

However, this does not overcome all difficulties. The communities and their leaders are threatened by many dangers. The priest, discreet as he may be, can abuse his influence and authority in many ways! But the community can help him to correct his failing. When the community carries no weight, the decision will depend on the good will of the priest who has the law on his side. A pastor can always abolish a parish council and demolish in one day the result of his predecessor's patient efforts! What is the Christian community I picture in my mind? Is it a group in which the priest is the pivot around which the laity revolve, or is it a community of partners seeking together to live by Jesus Christ so they can bear witness to him through their whole life? Do I love the Kingdom of God passionately enough to judge everything in relation to it, so as not to transform the slightest difficulties into conflicts and not magnify the wounds inflicted on my self-love?

Relations Between the Religious and the Laity

In the apostolic mission bonds of various kinds unite the laity and the religious. Certain laypersons who share with us the administration of such works as parishes, schools and colleges, pilgrimages, the press, are very close to us since we work side by side. They often wish to know more about our life, our spirit, our unique characteristics, in order to maintain the quality and growth of a center for Catholic publications or an educational institution. When at times they are called to take over our tasks, they want to carry on our work in the same spirit. And so they strive to discover this spirit; this obliges us, we might say in passing, to make an effort to re-express ourselves in their regard, with great benefit to ourselves.

Other laypersons, who are not always involved with us in a joint project, desire to share our

particular ecclesial awareness, to emphasize the evangelical values that are precious to us, and to be inspired by our spirituality. Where they are concerned, we can speak of an Assumptionist laity in the strict sense of the word.

There are not yet many laypersons who formulate such a request of the Assumption. There are many more of them in other religious families that have a greater interest than we in sharing their charism with the laity. The request is less ambiguous than it at first appears. It does not lead, as might have been feared, to establishing cenacles on the fringes of society and to turning laypersons away from their own mission. It is the updating of Third Orders in the spirit of Vatican II and of the renewal of the religious life.

Are we not too cautious in talking about our family, our spirit, our spirituality? Do we live it with enough intensity to speak about it convincingly? How can we express it to others if we are unable to formulate it for ourselves? Why are we so reticent to invite well-disposed laypersons to share our spirit, our spirituality?

II. FOUNDATIONS OF THIS RENEWED COLLABORATION

Priests and religious whose numbers are already declining in Europe, will be even fewer tomorrow. It is generally said that this reduction in force is the principal cause for the increased participation of the laity in ecclesial life. Necessity is the mother of invention! There is no denying that it has focused our consciousness and made certain measures indispensable. Yet this situation cannot of itself justify a greater commitment. The foundations are of a different sort. As we have said, the essential frame of reference is to be found in the ecclesiology of Vatican II. We Assumptionist religious have other reasons for increasing this collaboration between our religious and the laity. Three of them deserve special attention on our part:

- 1) the complementary and stimulating contribution of different vocations to witnessing in the Church;

- 2) our own tradition which associates religious and laity in the Assumptionist mission;
- 3) the specific needs of our time.

Complementary Vocations

One of the benefits of the renewal of religious life has been the more effective insertion of men and women religious into the local Church. Religious life has been less isolated, surer of itself and of its mission after the aggiornamento Chapters, thus becoming once more an active ferment of social and ecclesial transformation. This was a source of great joy to certain members of the laity who discovered, by contact with specific individuals and communities, a religious life which they had not known, and which now helped them to live out the demands of their own vocation as clarified by Vatican II. Besides, religious and laypersons often worked together in the same fields and fought the same injustices.

This proved to be mutually beneficial. In solidarity with the laity, the religious learned a great deal and received much from their daily contact. This has been for them a school of faith, of realism, of words translated into action, of tolerance, and of concern for others. Several of us have borne witness to this in a special issue of INFO (No. 138, March, 1992).

When collaboration between religious and laity is lived correctly as a sharing of faith, it contributes much to both; to each is brought out, reflected in the mirror of the other, the unique characteristics and specific calls of their respective vocations. Interaction between religious and laypersons is fruitful.

In its deepest reality religious life is a sign. It is given to the Church and to the world to signify their ultimate vocation in a paradoxical and extreme form. Since it directs our gaze toward the ultimate end, it needs the complementary witness of the life of the laity which incarnates the Gospel in the lumpy earthly dough of our societies. The baptismal vocation in the world and the religious life are two complementary vocations, indispensable to one another if they are to maintain a mutual fidelity. This is a conviction born much more from experience than reflection.

The consecrated life, especially institutionalized as it now is, is not always the radical evangelical sign it ought to be. And it does not have a monopoly on “evangelical radicalism.” The quality of life of certain laypersons makes it totally impossible for us to consider the secular life a less demanding form of Christian commitment. Evangelical intensity can be equally strong in either life choice. These two forms of life invite each other to give witness to the Gospel together. They should be envisioned not merely in parallel fashion but in their relationship to one another.

Our Own Tradition

The associates are divided into two classes: those who live in the house, and those who are outside and may even be married. Both groups should take on the spirit of the religious life as much as possible. They must think of themselves as religious, not by their clothing but by their way of life; not by certain practices that are more or less acceptable to all, but by their virtues. (Rule of the Teachers’ Association of the College de Nîmes, December 27, 1845, E.S., p. 1284).

A man of his own time, E. d’Alzon associated the religious and the laity very closely in his school, for this was a relatively common practice. An evangelical life is demanded of both groups; moral behavior and virtues are judged more important than clothing or practices. For Fr. d’Alzon unity came first; even though necessary distinctions came only later: the Congregation on the one hand and the Third Order on the other. The first attempt was not the rough sketch of the reality to come, but it was indicative: religious and laypersons were bonded by their common vision and evangelical life in the discharge of an apostolic program of action.

This will certainly be the case at the College de Nîmes: the great majority of the teachers will be laymen, all graduates of the University, remunerated according to the salary scale of the Royal Schools and continuing the work of the religious Orders in the field of Christian education. Over the course of the years the goal of enlightening minds with the clarity of Truth will become an intent to regenerate the Christian fabric of society. Faithful to his initial intuition, E. d’Alzon would continue to seek to enroll laypersons in this far-reaching enterprise to mobilize veritable legions for the Cause of God, to formulate Christian response to the ills of the time:

How can we combat such great evils? Don’t you think that a Third Order or some other kind of association, to which you will give whatever name you please, would be immensely useful if you choose intelligent men and if, through them, you prepared formation groups, Catholic

universities, the core of all the programs for the working classes which it is so important for us to carry out? (3rd Circular in preparation for the General Chapter, 1874, E.S., pp. 204–205).

Fr. d'Alzon's vision remains very apostolic And of course it presupposes an appropriate mode of life (cf. *E.S.*, pp. 1425–1428). As it has been wisely said: "The Third Order is not a pious association but a means of giving back to the laity who want to live by our spirit their responsibility in defense of the rights of God and of the Church." E. d'Alzon dearly perceived the merit as well as the flaws of the ecclesiastical mind, and also the vigor and possible excesses of the lay spirit. That is why he quickly understood how fruitful the combination of the two could be (cf. *E.S.* p. 1292-1296). His first disciples, Fathers Pernet and Picard, put these ideas into practice by founding various associations such as Notre Dame de Salut and its hospital auxiliary.

What happened subsequently? Expulsion from France, foundations expansion in Eastern Europe, the rapid development of the Congregation perhaps diminished an intense collaboration between the religious and the laity. At the General Chapter of 1912 Fr. E Bailly declared: "No one can measure how significant a role our former tertiaries, whether men or women, played in the creation and development of the Assumption in the past."

The history of this collaboration remains to be written. In a very clericalized Church, it may well have suffered eclipses, even when it was growing at Bonne-Pressé. But while the closest association clearly demands an evangelical mode of life, it is for an apostolic purpose. Its aim is deliberately apostolic The fact remains that the Kingdom of God progresses around us only if it grows within us as well.

The Capitular Rules (1964) speak of the Assumptionist fraternities of the Third Order of Saint Augustine. Then this early fruit of the Conciliar renewal recommends that "in our individual or organizational contacts we propose the riches of our spirituality to those who expect a more direct spiritual inspiration from us." Why should not the generous people who form a network around our institutions not know our religious family better, why should they not benefit from writings that can enrich their Christian life? "Could they not be assembled in a very broad organization that would facilitate our action toward them and render it more efficacious?" This suggestion did not lead to any concrete results in this form. After all, according to our Rule of Life (No. 16), the formation of responsible laypersons is indeed one of our priorities.

The Specific Demands of Our Time

Surprisingly, a growing number of laypersons are asking to share the charism of men's and women's religious institutes. Apostolic collaboration does not suffice for them. They desire a much deeper form of belonging; they want to drink from the wellspring, even if it means struggling with the Founder's texts!

Apparently, this is not a passing fad. The transfer of educational, health care and charitable institutions to the laity is not foreign to this rather new phenomenon. The teaching Congregations have played a decisive role. In their concern to maintain the reputation as well as the spirit of the institution they were bequeathing, they invited administrators and faculty members to become acquainted with their charism, so as to seek inspiration from it and even to live by it in their own way. Communion in the same charism by married persons, celibates and religious, by persons from every social class and profession, in charismatic or other movements, has certainly played an exemplary role.

Can we accede to this request that laypersons share in our charism in an all-embracing way? Should we knowingly encourage this request as a grace for a religious family and as a sign that its charism is finding new fruitfulness? Why is there this desire for spirituality? Will not the religious institute lose its monopoly on its unique charism by reason of new interpretations at the hands of non-religious? And above all, when laypersons are affiliated with religious Orders, does this not distance them from their own mission within the local Church? These are questions galore.

Indispensable Clarifications

1) Every charism at the origin of a Congregation involves three elements: an original perception of the mystery of Christ (its own spirituality), a certain type of community life, specific apostolates or a characteristic way of living the common apostolic tasks.

The participation of laypersons in this charism viewed in the strict sense of the term cannot be reduced to a simple collaboration in apostolic tasks. Communion in the congregation's specific spirituality, which has a profound impact on its apostolic activity, is indispensable: this is the breath of life and the foundation of everything.

2) A charism is a gift made to the Church in order to build it up and vivify it. It is natural that the religious should not be the only ones to benefit from it. This has long been understood. The Third Orders, we might say, extended the charism's sphere of influence to the advantage of the laity. Today Canon 303 grants this right to every religious Institute. Every charism may be shared in a variety of forms and degrees, according to the designs of the Holy Spirit.

3) And yet can a charism intended for religious be appropriate for laypersons? What kind of transposition will be required for it to become a wellspring of life and faith for them as well?

A wellspring is often only a streamlet that cannot quench the thirst of many or, conversely, it can be a gushing and inexhaustible fountain. A charism that is too specific can have only a limited impact. Conversely, a strong and simple spirituality which has endured across several centuries and cultures can certainly inspire the evangelical life of baptized Christians engaged in diverse and complementary vocations. The only condition for its success is that it respect the originality of each. That is the golden rule in this matter.

If the layperson does not take his own vocation seriously, he will be content with a religious spirituality tailored to his own dimensions. The religious will make a copy of their own spirituality for his use. They will be satisfied with indispensable adaptations. Such an attitude would be pernicious for the laypersons, for the Church, and for the charism. Even if the founder proceeded in this way, since Vatican II his successors cannot do likewise. The laity are to accept the charism, but with the intention to make it their own and to re-express it in their own way. Then, through them, the charism will bring its message to the whole world. The intuition that inspired the Third Order still has its *raison d'être*. When the secular order is brought up to date and revitalized it is a challenge to the religious institute; it helps the religious to be faithful to their own charism.

III. ACCELERATING THE PACE

We are not suiting out from scratch. Collaboration with the laity already has a long history at Assumption and it has greatly increased in the last few years. We are in danger of being

satisfied with the status quo although everything presses us to progress, to develop our gains, to boldly innovate in various fields. The following suggestions are made to stimulate our dynamism and our creativity. However, two preliminary conditions must be met in implementing them: we must give constant attention to all aspects of the layperson's mission and there must be an indispensable change in our mentality.

The Real Mission of the Laity

Many baptized and professed Catholics do not in their hearts really belong to the Church. This was acknowledged by the Bishops assembled in Santo Domingo in October 1992. These laypersons have not truly assimilated Christian values, which do not have much impact on their day-to-day attitudes. That is why evangelical criteria have little influence on the life of society. Priests share responsibility for this state of affairs. They are sometimes mediocre or poor teachers of the laity and are concerned only with their participation in strictly church-related tasks. This is not enough.

All laypersons do not have the same interests and they cannot all be active in the professional, political, and social life. The Christian community is not the primary area of their responsibility. This is something we should never forget even if, in a parish, we are short of leaders for the liturgy, catechesis, and other activities. To quote the Bishops' meeting in San Domingo once again: "The social doctrine of the Church is an essential part of the Christian message. Teaching, disseminating, and attaining a deeper understanding of it and how it is to be applied are absolutely necessary for the new Evangelization of our peoples."

The Christian life consists purely and simply in being a disciple of Jesus Christ in every facet of one's life. This is terribly demanding. One of our tasks is to try to awaken many laypersons to the magnitude of their mission. This is an imperative to be respected whenever there is question of initiating laypersons into our charism for the purpose of their active participation in our work.

As one of our members has written:

We direct our message to laypersons. It is not a matter of giving them texts (or workshops, lectures, sermons,...) in which they might see our face. We must bring them to see their face, their life, by offering them our 'charism' which they can make their very own, God willing! They

are not called to imitate us, but to become fully themselves in a different way”.

We must therefore work out pedagogies, programs for work, sharing, and prayer that will be instruments enabling laypersons to ‘decipher’ Father d’Alzon’s spirit in their lives.

Changing Our Outlook

Even though the collaboration between religious and laypersons has a long history, the fact remains that until recent years the communitarian responsibilities and tasks were assumed by us. We depended entirely on our own resources. We were self-sufficient. This has become less and less possible. Even though it was not done without hitches, some Provinces have successfully introduced managers in our homes for the elderly, in the Hospitality and pilgrimage Centers. Their organization had to be revised accordingly. In light of the number of young religious in formation and the demands stemming from this in Zaire and Madagascar, we can no longer be the jack-of-all-trades missionaries that we have been in the past. We must, if our finances permit, gear down our responsibilities and depend more on the collaboration of laypersons, allowing them an indispensable freedom of action.

This is not a simply technical operation. The insertion of laypersons right into the fabric of our communitarian life, demands on our part a change in mentality, habits, ways of looking at things and of making decisions. A change in outlook is demanded of us at a moment when our communities are growing old and find it hard to adapt to much-needed transformations. This new orientation will be beneficial only if we are willing to adapt to new conditions. Shall we be able to sacrifice our habits, our comfort to our love for the Kingdom? For, in the last analysis, that is what is really at stake!

Continuing and Intensifying Collaboration

1) Some Provinces have responsibility for important institutions in the areas of publishing, higher education and secondary schools which are managed and staffed by laypersons, who are sometimes very numerous. For many years they have imagined organizational structures, Councils consisting of equal representation, regular meetings, charts defining the respective powers and prerogatives, and employment contracts explicitly stating the conditions required to accede to certain position. This provides for effective co-responsibility in administering the

development of these genuine business ventures, in maintaining their Christian identity and in assuring their future.

We must pay close attention to all these procedures for concerted action and decision-making! We must prepare meetings so they will not deteriorate into routine! We must think of the future so that a new generation of Assumptionists may be trained for such responsibilities! It is a decisive form of collaboration for the Congregation! It is a place of permanent training in co-responsibility. It is a school of realism in which the Gospel encounters our society, clashes with economic, cultural, and pedagogical realities as well as with the difficulties facing every Catholic institution in our own day!

2) Some Provinces still run, sometimes reluctantly, schools where administrative power is being turned over to carefully chosen lay directors. Other Provinces, confronted with the same problems, had already proceeded in this way some time ago. We can therefore draw lessons from experience and restate a few elementary rules of conduct that unfortunately are not always respected!

3) Let us not wait until we have a real emergency to make a move toward replacement. Let us not play the politics of the ostrich. Let us not hold out until our strength is exhausted, all the while neglecting to prepare for the future, to foresee the necessary stages, to set certain deadlines for change. Otherwise the situation will be settled catastrophically amid disastrous conditions. It is not enough just to pull out of the game and abandon the school to its sad fate or to the highest bidder! That would be immoral!

4) Let us take care of the transitions without lessening our interest in spiritual leadership.

5) Let us share our spirit so that, when it is picked up by others, it may be the guiding light of the institutional structures and a ferment of dynamism. The Province of North Belgium is to be congratulated for instilling the spirit of Assumption into the leadership corps of its two schools.

6) When a Province no longer has the personnel to maintain a prestigious work like the Oriental Institute or to take pastoral initiatives to meet current needs, it can always mobilize competent laypersons and support them financially and pastorally, as we have seen in Holland. There religious keep close contact with the young lay pastoral workers venturing into a predominantly

working-class milieu.

The General Chapter has set up a special fund to provide for the needs of formation of Assumptionist candidates. When approached, the Province responded generously. But why would we not support, wherever possible, programs of formation specifically targeted to the laity? Why not couple our resources, our pastoral wisdom and finances on the one hand with competence and generosity on the other, to achieve a common objective?

Innovating Without Too Much Fear

What shall we do with that immense school in Plovdiv if it is returned to us? Will we be obliged to completely abandon to others our schools in Argentina or Colombia? With whom can we collaborate in Russia where there is so much to do? Shall we passively watch the deterioration of living conditions in Africa and do nothing as if the question did not concern us? We must not sin through lack of imagination.

Do not imagine that I underrate all that is already being accomplished I am well aware of many successes, of the generosity of certain communities, of the efforts of our service centers (supply centers) as well as many other things. But we must go further. We need to overcome our self-sufficiency reflex in order to develop all forms of collaboration with greater boldness. As I see it, we need to systematically explore the following courses of action:

1) Have greater recourse than we now do to qualified individuals and organizations. We are deeply rooted in the habit of looking to our own almost exclusively for the person qualified for a specific task. We even run the risk of giving up the project altogether if we do not find such a person—and this often happens. Why can't we develop the contrary reflex: where can we find the same competence? Because of our lack of sufficient interest, because we don't know how to prepare a résumé and to follow it through, we don't get much in the line of scholarships, nor of more substantial grants, nor of contributions from specialized organizations. We collaborate very little with groups focusing habitually on the Third World

2) Seek out well-motivated by coworkers when a highly desirable program dearly exceeds our capacities.

3) Highlight more adequately the status of lay brothers in our religious family. Situations vary greatly in different Provinces, but the opportunities offered to those who join the Congregation are too vague.

We do not need to imitate others, but their procedures can be useful to us. Certain Congregations are much more skillful than we in finding temporary collaborators who render effective service even in the missions. There is no question of accepting coworkers whose youth and lack of experience might prove to be handicaps. Why should not mature men come and lend us a hand for a certain time?

One last clarification: an undertaking such as this cannot be left to the initiative of each individual, or it will quickly deteriorate into the collection of funds for personal endeavors. We shall get nowhere without concerted effort and without a minimum of programming. The General Chapter emphasized this strongly when it encouraged dreaming up new projects. It also invited us to share with others the riches of our life, our spirituality, and our charism.

Quickened by the Same Spirit

“In a number of instances, collaboration in our works has become a partnership: laypersons act in close association with Assumption whose apostolic program they recognize and whose spirit they share.” (General Chapter, 1987)

This form of relationship goes beyond mere camaraderie. It involves the ratification of an apostolic program and of the spirit that inspires it. There already is a genuine communion within a common orientation and action. There are diverse modalities of participation. We can even distinguish various degrees.

1) Participation through osmosis is the simplest and should be the most frequent form. It is not very well developed at Assumption, and scarcely emphasized in parishes. Certainly we have not lost favor because of this. We are appreciated everywhere and our parishes or parochial districts have been notable for their communitarian presence and their pastoral orientations. There is indeed a certain sense of family, a closeness and a simplicity that are rather common

at Assumption.

However the Assumptionist inspiration is not very explicit and we are excessively discreet about our spirit, our spirituality. This is probably due to a number of causes: timidity, lack of self-confidence, our loyalty toward the diocesan church, our selflessness, and an insufficient knowledge of our spirit. Yet it is regrettable that our pastoral activity bears so little the Assumptionist features while not for that matter belittling diocesan orientations. Would not our spirit give them a quality of its own? Would not a real dynamism be breathed into a pastoral program? Could not our three distinctive hallmarks, once carefully studied and explicated—doctrinal, social, ecumenical—be the heart of such a program? Then the Assumptionist spirit would be diffused as though by osmosis.

2) The partnership described earlier is a second phase. The sharing of our spirituality and active participation in Assumptionist (a.a.) apostolic programs would be the third. The whole gamut of the proposals set forth by the Chapter concerns these two degrees of participation. The text on the Assumptionist spirit, which can be used in sharing with laypersons, has been entrusted to the General Council. It will appear in due time. The two albums presenting the Assumptionists [the French and the International], are rough drafts of it.

Six great missionary priorities ratified by the General Chapter concern the Congregation from now until the year 2000. Collaboration between the religious and the laity is one of them. We are invited to get it going without delay. Laypersons will not come to us on their own if we do not make the effort to reach out to them and arouse their interest in our way of life, in what we are trying to do, in short, in the great Cause of the Kingdom. For the underlying strength of their commitment to us as well as of our commitment to them can only be Jesus Christ and his Gospel. Father d'Alzon calls on them as well as on us to be laborers for the Kingdom.

The major text of the Chapter: "The Passion for the Kingdom of God in today's world," has been conscientiously studied by the communities. This year it bounces back in a very concrete form: greater emphasis on collaboration with the laity in various ways. Unless we get started in achieving it without delay we shall be hampered in attaining the other goals set by the Chapter. Realizing this, the Chapter sent this message to the laity.

The Chapter has constantly referred to the future, to openness and to mission. Our reasons for hoping and living are great, committed as we are to the service of the Kingdom with our whole being. And yet, how are we to face this future except with you, the laity?

Rome, June 23, 1994

Fr. Claude Maréchal, a.a.

Superior General