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OUR 150 YEARS ANOTHER CENTURY AT OUR DOORSTEP

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Brothers,

Once a year, and no more than that, I write you a letter. It has become a habit. For our Congregation it constitutes a reference point. It is a prolongation of the General Chapter, since each letter reexamines one of its major orientations.

But this time it will be different. I have decided to anticipate the event we will celebrate in the year 2000. Along with all of humankind, we will indeed enter into the third millennium of the Christian era. Together with the disciples of Jesus, we will celebrate the great Jubilee which we have been preparing. To this double anniversary will be added a third one, less prestigious but highly significant for us Assumptionists: the 150th anniversary of our foundation which coincided with the pronouncement of the solemn public vows of Father d'Alzon and his first disciples.

It would be unfortunate if the resounding celebrations of the millennium were to drown out a slice of history much more limited with respect to time and space and much less universal: our 150 years of existence. It is important to assess the road we have traveled and to light up the one we are now taking. We are opening the door on another century.

Past and Present

Is it not uncalled for to celebrate Assumption as she is on the wane, according to the figures? If we recall past triumphs, will we not thereby present her as more alive than she really is? Will we not gloss over her weaknesses so as to make her shine? No, let us have no fear. Reality frees us from the temptation of triumphalism and that is all to the good. But reality does not prevent us from remembering the past, nor from discerning the richness of the present, even if it be only to express our gratitude. Our undeniable shortcomings should not be allowed to conceal the signs of life which give us hope for the future. Since some of the institutions which date from our founding still exist today, nay, even flourish, isn't that a sign of life, and even more, a heroic feat? Consider just our publications: *La Croix*, *Le Pèlerin* and the *Echo de Lourdes* in Chile are fine examples.

Next year, around this time, you will receive the report of the Superior-General on the state of the Congregation in view of the upcoming chapters, both provincial and general. This letter is not meant as a foretaste. It will not list the festivities linked to our anniversary either: preparation for it has hardly begun. As far as that goes, I will limit myself to a few suggestions in order to deal with our spiritual preparation at greater length. That is my great concern. After ten years as General and numerous travels on the five continents, I can assess better the conversions which are indispensable to Assumption in order to remain faithful to her vocation and to enter with calm into the year 2000. To my mind such attitudes, which agree exactly with what we are, appear critical for today and for tomorrow. That's the key to unlock our future. A future which is apparently in jeopardy if we consider undeniable and worrisome facts. But if we truly seek the Kingdom of God, why should not all the rest be given to us in addition?

Are we a Congregation adrift?

Does clear-headedness not compel us to talk this way? In view of our long-standing establishment in countries which are coming face to face with secularization, where religious vocations are becoming less numerous, we are not managing, in spite of numerous admissions in one location or another, to slow down the drop in our membership. In ten years, from December 1986 to December 1996, the Congregation decreased by 128 religious. To maintain our membership at the present level and to compensate for the average thirty deaths per year, it would require forty or so new professions each year, taking into account the foreseeable drop-outs. Such a number is difficult to achieve, even by redoubling our efforts in the line of vocational recruitment. The manpower in our family should decrease further in the next twenty years. A sudden spectacular surge is hardly probable.

The consequences of this replacement by dribblets and of this aging process are well-known. Because the religious are less numerous and more aged, we are closing houses and doing away with apostolic works. An atmosphere of decline predominates, a hardly invigorating situation. It has reached the point where certain Regions or Provinces see their disappearance as probable.

It is true that the situation is less dramatic in those continents which are for the moment less affected by secularization, but especially for us, who are a Congregation with modest resources, nowhere is there any gain. Unlike some other Congregations, Assumption has found it difficult to get off the mark in Latin America. We are slowly getting underway in Eastern Europe, but it would be premature to sound the trumpet of victory. The abundance of fruit promised us in Korea will not be harvested tomorrow. After that there are Africa and Madagascar. Admissions there are indeed regular and numerous, but setbacks are not lacking, and the work of formation is hampered in countries which are totally disorganized economically and socially, all the more so that experienced formators are not plentiful.

Could it be that we are partly responsible for this decrease? Some among us who are very much attached to our family, are nevertheless quite critical of it: "Apathy and lack of fire; that's how I would characterize Assumption," writes one of them. "We put up with aging, we risk little in the way of creativity, we hardly discuss. We do little analysis, not much forecasting. At best, things are managed without much willingness to change and imagination. There is somewhat of a refusal to change and, with the security that money creates, a middle-class tendency to take it easy exists alongside remarkable self-sacrifice. Are we still a sign of contradiction, of a will to be

at variance with the world?

“We belong to a body which no longer has much ambition, conceives no projects, does not dream; a body with traces of beauty which can deceive just as much as some of the recent foundings.”

There still rings in my ears this other question: “Amid societies which are riddled with unemployment, AIDS, poverty and war, are we unquestionably men of our times as we describe ourselves? Are we really paving the way for the swing of our Congregation from north to south?”

The other side

Faced with this data, who would dare say that Assumption is flourishing, that she is doing well? Certainly not I, and in my report next year I will list many weaknesses that disturb me. However, they are not capable of obscuring the more than genuine faith and generosity of spirit as well as the signs of spiritual vitality and of apostolic dynamism which guarantee a future for a body which will be numerically smaller but better motivated. Today's Assumption gives me reason to have faith in her future.

Some days when reality is so heavy that it bears down on one and crushes one, I open the picture-book album, “The Assumptionists. Men of faith in full vitality.”

When I read this page or that one which reflects our authentic image just as Father d'Alzon wanted us to be, I regain confidence in the future, and I get back to work. We end up forgetting the evidence. To repeat some of the statements strung throughout its pages, Assumption is a family scattered to the four corners of the world, a mosaic of colors and of peoples on all five continents. It results from the encounter of cultures, of mentalities, of values of twenty-five countries. It is an evangelical interracial brotherhood of a thousand men who preach the same Gospel and honor one father, E. d'Alzon, their founder and source of inspiration.

At Assumption we have but one heart and we share the same spirit. The Reign of God is the ambition, the great passion of our religious family. It opens up broad horizons. It encourages us

to think big and far ahead, through extensive projects as well as modest successes. But it is also, from top to bottom, the work of God. That is why this messenger must agree profoundly with the Kingdom he announces, following the example of Jesus, the most excellent of apostles.

Assumption has a capstone which holds all together: Jesus Christ. It's in him that life is knit together and unified.

Assumption is a constant: faith and the cutting edge. That twin fidelity lies at the depth of its being. It is the key which unlocks the heart of this strange Congregation.

God: the deepest motivation for our life and action

You will recognize in this title our collective I.D. card as religious (RL 22). It is a profession of faith; this item and the following one are also a magnificent synthesis of the religious profession. It lacks nothing.

"In a world where we share the quest and efforts of men to become fully human...", we are the effective human companions of the people of our generation.

Unlike many, we are believers, indeed Christians. God is the deepest motivation for our life and action, and Jesus Christ is in our eyes the perfect human according to any and all scales.

God relies on us to "fulfill his purpose of being present to and in communion with" all people. We are not nameless envoys but those he has "encountered personally."

That encounter, that mission will imprint on our life a double characteristic: the following of Christ along the paths of the Gospel, the choice to risk our life in the adventure of encountering God. These words are carefully chosen. Whoever speaks of walking raises thoughts of motion, distance covered, itinerary. Whoever speaks of risk and adventure speaks of the unforeseen, the unprecedented and also of surprising discoveries. My life is a Gospel walk, a road to

Emmaus, a spiritual itinerary. My life is an adventure with God along uncharted roads which hold in store for me many surprises and joys.

To be a disciple of Jesus, walking behind him, risking one's life to travel with God, is to forswear standing still, to stir, to make progress, to grow. Our religious profession "stimulates us to grow constantly in faith, hope and love."

Staking one's whole life on God

Therein, it seems to me, lie the seeds of conversion for each one of us. Sometimes I dread those words we dare to sing: "I wish to love no one but you, seek no one except you, serve no one but you, Lord; I want only to be yours," words we were saying this morning. It takes many years to reach that point, assuming that we do get there. And yet, that is the obligation which we take upon ourselves at our religious profession: give all that we have and all that we are to God so that we may have life from him and for him and may belong to him to the utmost degree possible. Father d'Alzon never ceases to preach to us this absolute belonging to God, this total gift of ourselves in the service of the Kingdom. Long before that Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, he would say again and again that adopting the style of life that Jesus led during his existence on earth—poverty, chastity and obedience—summons us to appropriate his feelings and heartfelt attitudes so as to belong totally to the Father, just as he did. The messenger must be in total accord with the Kingdom he announces.

Even though our contemporary society demurs, it has a vital need of women and men of whatever age who bet their whole lives on God. There is no need to hide the secret of our lives from people who would be flabbergasted by our revealing it, so much are their lives the antithesis of ours. May the Father of Jesus Christ be our permanent but repeated choice, ratified at moments of decision, at the momentous turning-points of our existence.

Allow me to recommend, in accordance with our Assumption tradition, certain attitudes we too often lack.

Every person is a sacred history

Let us rediscover our life as the risky adventure of encounter with God. I am quite well aware that our generations did not receive the same formation. It dismays me sometimes that too many religious are only practitioners of the “spiritual exercises” prescribed by our Rule. They are hardly touched by the idea of spiritual growth, of strong convictions hammered out over the course of one’s life, of a journey marked by decisive stages. At Assumption we lack spiritual personalities sharply delineated and credible.

Let us deepen our spiritual experience, renew the dynamics of our spiritual life, and merge the divine with the human. Let us reexamine in faith, by the light of the Word of God, the events that have marked us, the attitudes which raise us up or cast us down. In that way we can develop, grow, make solidly present in our lives the mystery of Christ, and implant our faith in time and space.

We must allow God to shape our spiritual personality in unison with us, to lay out with us our particular spiritual itinerary. So wrote one of us, using terms very close to those of our Rule of Life, when he accepted an assignment which changed his life considerably: “I thought I must accept this new human and spiritual adventure to respond to the confidence of my brothers.... I foresee that this decision will draw me onto new paths, unsuspected and full of surprises....”

We must become familiar with the spiritual and apostolic journeys of the Peters, the Pauls, the Augustines and the Fathers of the Church, the d’Alzons, the Pernets, the Picards and many others. The thorough analysis of the spiritual and apostolic experience of Father d’Alzon over the course of his years and of his trials is revealing.

We must give serious thought to the stages of the spiritual life, to the discoveries and attitudes proper to each of life’s ages. We should especially not think that we are useless when there sets in a loss of strength, a handicap or disability, even if our being brought down to the level of the powerless Christ is particularly crucifying. “Healthy or ill, young or old, we share this apostolic mission with our brothers, each according to his vocation and situation” (RL 18).

A faith like new

What a blessed era it was when faith was confirmed by successive generations in unbroken succession, each one serving as a link in a continuous chain. But no less blessed is our own

generation which subjects faith to the crucible of criticism and obliges us to bore more deeply, to scrape off the scales, to give new expression to the heart of faith by means of other words and symbols.

For a while people thought it would suffice to repackage, to express the sempiternal faith in other words, in different more accessible and more easily understood terms. But they forgot that a human being is molded by his environment. Technology with its ever accelerating rhythms has forged new worlds and new mentalities quite often impermeable to faith and very much closed to everything which appears alien to personal experience.

This is a blessed era in which we must reformulate articles of faith for modern man, reinvent the faith in some way without changing its essential truth. How fortunate we are to be able to benefit already from the stores of catechetical, liturgical and theological knowledge. Too often we endure, as if it were a fetter, the painful labor of giving birth to a renewed expression of faith, when it is in the first place an opportunity for us, a grace of rediscovering a faith which transcends cryptic language and static phrases.

In many countries with a Christian tradition strongly stamped with a distrust of institutions and a religious individualism, the language of faith is no longer understood, has become insignificant. But the inevitable suffering which arises among us from that fact is also a call not to resign ourselves to that state of things but to imitate Father d'Alzon when he would not accept that God no longer had rights in the society of his time.

We are given an invitation to be God's witness by our life and our word, just as Father d'Alzon always required it of his sons. We are invited not so much to explore our faith in order to possess it, but rather to live the faith in order to experience its truth and internal coherence. We are invited to grind up the Gospel so that it will be, first of all for us, a word of life, nourishing and substantial, and so that it will shine forth like a new word, original and provocative in the crowded moments of our life when noise gives place to silence. A word of faith vivid and striking, bursting with evangelical vigor is the fruit of internal recollection and of a long-standing familiarity with the Gospel. The prophet's mouth is first of all a disciple's ear.

We hear it said that God's hearing is one of the weakest. Not so fast! It could be that we have tarnished his name too much. Maybe we have forgotten that he is the Holy God, the Unknowable. We have allowed ourselves to speak thoughtlessly of him, without having made enough of a search for him.

Father d'Alzon vehemently reproached the preachers of his time for this. Do we not need to make evident the close tie he used to establish between prayer, study and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, the heart of faith?

Man of faith and man of his time

This is the most frequently quoted expression from the Rule of Life, occasionally to the detriment of the first part of the phrase which ties this behavior to the example of Jesus himself, "witness of the Father's love and bound in solidarity to his fellow man." This means, according to the family album which portrays the Assumptionists, "he must untiringly seek God by prayer, study and wholehearted acceptance and be an indefatigable witness of Jesus Christ in all of his humanity." Like Jesus who links in himself an unconditional faithfulness to his Father and a flawless solidarity with the most lowly people, it is imperative that we hold on to both ends of the chain, even at the price of almost being painfully dismembered. That's the condition of evangelical witnessing. It is a fruitful tension, faithfulness to the Father being a guarantee of true solidarity and of the genuine bonds which give a concrete form to the Father's love.

This double attachment to people and to God, this solidarity fully as strong with the One as with others, seems to me to be fundamental to Assumption. And I worry at times that they might crumble away given our age, our kind of life, the specialization of functions, the comfort which is linked for us all to the rise in the standard of living, the style of our residences, the anonymity within large cities, and parish ministry restricted sometimes to small groups of faithful.

Do we not run the risk of living too much among ourselves, without much bonding with others, affected very little by the dramas which bring turmoil to the lives of many people, more passive spectators of the multiple breakdowns in our society than active agents to repair them? Are we not in danger of retreating within ourselves as our age increases, of prioritizing our comfort, of seeking less contact with an active and militant population?

Whereas effectively living close to those who labor, struggle and suffer seems to me an important condition for a fruitful apostolate, I feel less than formerly the pulse beat of the world in our communities. I do feel a genuine professional conscience, a serious engagement in an assigned mission, an overloading of work among some young men in great demand; I pick up much less the echo of the problems and the struggles of our age.

Let us take care not to live on the fringe of today's world, of its complexity and its inconsistencies, of its anomalies and its conflicts, of its successes and its suffering. In spite of age, let us imagine fresh formulas of presence and closeness. Otherwise we will give up whole sections of the Rule of Life. And we will forget the lessons of yesterday and today which are still substantiated by some of the recent stages in the training of deacons: the close encounter, whether in a hospital or other location, in the contact with all kinds of persons, is a school for active monitoring and humanizing, for Christian faith and for an understanding of church and the Eucharist. "I have understood better how much the Eucharist can be a strength, a viaticum and a sign of communion. It is becoming more and more the heart of my prayer and of my life."

When reflecting on their mission and invited to become contemplative prophets, the Little Sisters of the Assumption had this to say: our mission "requires us to keep alive the memory of the Dream of God and to manifest it to people in such a way as to make hope possible in the midst of their broken lives. Sometimes they are the ones who give us hope again.... We must have a spirituality sufficiently strong and vibrant to welcome and reveal God who is always on the side of the poor and those who are powerless, and we must have that in spite of numerous reasons to doubt it." (Thy Kingdom come). Would we not have to do likewise? Do we not have to cultivate the qualities of heart and the basic attitudes associated with availability—which require a willingness to receive as well as to give, based on mutual respect and esteem (RL 19)—to which Assumption has always clung?

In an apostolic community

"As disciples of Saint Augustine, Assumptionists live their faith, prayer and apostolate in community. Is this the ideal life they dreamed of? Not always. It is a daily choice, an act of faith, a road that cleaves to the Gospel," so reads a caption in the family album (p.4). On another page (p. 10) it tells us, "study, prayer, action form the rhythm of its days. These are three forms of the same passion for the Kingdom, all three to be lived shoulder to shoulder. In an apostolic community mission and prayer continually interact. The mission of each member nourishes fraternal life, which in turn stimulates the mission. For apostolic activities must be concerted, shared and evaluated in a climate of fraternal candor and prayer. This sharing of faith is the crucible of the apostolic community. And thus the community becomes 'one soul and one heart turned toward God.'"

The further I go, the more I believe that for us the apostolic community is the crucible in which our religious life takes shape, where everyone of its dimensions is consolidated. The community

is not just one simple facet of our formation; it is the key. Man, or rather the man of faith, cannot grow except in and through the community. Moreover, community and apostolate fit together snugly and reinforce one another. At Assumption, the apostolate is fundamentally communal. As long as it will not be, we won't really be ourselves. Although it is not an unrealizable ideal, the apostolic community is, indeed, an arduous exercise of asceticism, a school of purification and of renouncement. It is the most excellent locale for evangelical conversion which can take various forms. By way of example, I give the following three:

- Divesting myself of what quickly becomes my field of apostolate. Every mission is one taken on permanently and not only at the outset. Each person has a tendency to appropriate the field which has been assigned to him in order to take charge of it, to rule over it as the boss. Communal apostolate requires renunciation, stripping, making the most of the talents of others, sharing and common pursuit.
- Deliberate and joyful participation in common practices without which an apostolic community has no real consistency. For the community needs some very concrete mediations in order to exist. It is built of apostolic prayer, the community Chapter, and apostolic planning.
- The refusal of the easier solution: the law of least effort which leads to repeating oneself, to doing as one has always done, without seeking to break new ground. Whereas faithfulness is of necessity creative.

The apostolic community is not a new idea. The last General Chapter dedicated to it the third section of "the Passion for the Kingdom of God in Today's World," which I invite you to reread. What a beautiful anniversary it would be if our 150 years signaled a decisive step in that direction. It is true that we lack experience and method, but why don't we seek all the more to acquire them?

If the young among us do not learn to take notice of what they are living, to express it to others, to discover the richness of life and of faith, they won't know any better than their elders how to spot the signs of God in themselves and also around them and to marvel at them together. The stages of pastoral preparation are an invitation to that attentiveness to life so as to see it with the eyes of faith. Let us give them all the importance they deserve, and let us take good care of their outcome. You don't get to be an expert pianist without years of tedious exercises; likewise, you will truly appreciate apostolic sharing only after having practiced a long time without apparent progress.

A community of believers

As religious we are neither supermen nor models of humanity. We are nonetheless called to make shine through our frailty the sign of a man regenerated in Jesus Christ, of a man reconciled to himself, to his neighbor, and to the world. By our calling, we must conform ourselves to Jesus Christ, the man who is perfect in all his aspects. Religious life adopts the style of life of Jesus himself; so it must normally, in spite of inevitable setbacks, give birth to that beautiful model of humanity that is Jesus.

In the long-lasting effort of regeneration of self in Jesus Christ, of increased mastery of one's being, of putting order in one's own drives, those engines of life as well as of death, the community plays a decisive role. It is one of the privileged places to cultivate a relationship with others so indispensable to psychic and affective development. It is a place for decisive experiences:

- of the otherness of duration and of everyday life;
- of communication and of non-communication, which once gotten by proves to be a path to life;
- of acceptance by one's neighbor, of gratitude, of trust and of forgiveness as well as of their opposites;
- of deeply felt communion but also of secret areas which we refuse to give away;
- of contributing to one another, of stimulating, of the surpassing of oneself, of solidarity but also of just the reverse;

- of fraternity which is broken and then taken up again with the passage of days;

- of the power and the joy of shared faith.

Many communities are far removed from such an ideal, I think. I am in a good position to know our weaknesses. But painful mind-blocks, dead ends even, must not lead us to forget other contributions of the local or provincial community! When one mentions only negative things, one finishes by seeing only them. Whereas every community which is a source of life builds me up as long as there remains a minimum of communication. Would we not need to pay more attention to the positive and to enhance it?

This is equally true of faith. Secularized and discreet as we are, we seldom speak spontaneously about our faith, so much so that faith responses hardly rise to the surface. The word of faith seems to be reserved to the chapel. And yet our faith would not be what it is without the contribution of the Assumptionist community which extends beyond the purely local one. There again, the obvious shortfalls should not make us forget the almost daily benefits:

- An atmosphere of faith, thanks to the gospel inspiration of the community, if at least it is not hidebound;

- Familiarity with the Christian mystery which is studied and meditated;

- The mutual stimulation of believers who accept to help one another discern and move forward together. That is a support for difficult missions, for decisive steps forward;

- Integration into a great line of Assumptionist believers both living and dead. We have a share in the communion of Assumption saints, of those of all its families.

- A considerable broadening of spiritual, ecclesial and apostolic horizons through assimilation of the spirit and spirituality of Assumption. Our tradition is a school of faith, of an

evangelical way of thinking, and of generosity.

Should we not, apart from the jubilee celebrations, share more greatly among ourselves our common gratitude to Assumption and celebrate it? Affection for our family is a value that we must preserve with care.

The stamp of Assumption: faith, justice, communion

Our Rule of Life is sparing of words but explicit: “the preaching of Jesus Christ is inseparable from the promotion of the whole man in justice, love and unity. All our works will be stamped with a doctrinal, social and ecumenical spirit” (RL 16). For a long time to come, we will need to look deeper into these two orientations. The Assumptionist spirit with our Augustinian heritage are summarized by three nouns: Truth, love, unity or by three adjectives: doctrinal, social, ecumenical. These formulae are easily transposed to others like justice, love, unity or else faith, justice, communion, but in all cases they are expressions of the same spirit, which likes to hold these three characteristics together more than to dream up works which give testimony to any particular one of them.

Indeed, their close union guarantees their equilibrium and assures their fruitfulness. Because, as we well know, cut off from love and unity, truth degenerates into proud self-importance, into dogmatism or tyranny. On the other hand, a love which disregards truth and justice and which is not concerned with personalizing, with making anyone aware of their responsibility, or with promoting, does not deserve the name of charity. Also a unity without truth or love is built on sand.

Born at the beginning of modern times and of mechanization, Assumption does not feel out of synch with the world of today. The great concerns of Father d’Alzon remain current, in a quite different context of course. Perhaps we realize this more and more insofar as we become reconciled with our past. But we need to pursue our efforts in several compatible directions.

Let us not relinquish these characteristics to the few among us who have become specialists in a doctrinal emphasis or in a social orientation. The stamp belongs to all of us; let us not turn it over to a few in order to relieve ourselves of a burden. Our spirit must stamp all our activities without exception.

Let us not confuse spirit with a characteristic activity. You can exhibit an ecumenical spirit without hobnobbing with Protestants or Orthodox just as you can maintain close ties with them without giving evidence of a truly ecumenical attitude. Unity is broader than the sole unity among the disciples of Jesus which he asked of them with great pain. Our spirit must inspire activities but even more worthwhile attitudes in a variety of contexts. It is those attitudes which follow from our spirit that we must clarify, polish and give concrete expression to; otherwise we stall with nice words and don't go into action.

To campaign for unity is to be, every day and everywhere, a clear link and not a divisive force. The ecumenical spirit is certainly a passionate search for truth, but it is also a listening with good will, a refusal to get the better of another, and a humbleness. So was it defined in the fifth Letter to the Religious on 27 July 1990, (p. 28):

The ecumenical spirit, and it is ours, rejects intolerance, narrowness, sectarianism, prejudice, exclusion. It does not judge without knowing the facts. It is a gracious welcome and a dialogue. It listens more than it speaks. It has such a lofty idea of God and of the truth that it cannot consider itself as its exclusive holder. It does not measure everything by the standards of its own experience set up as a norm.

Let us not wait for the ability to change the whole world before we get to work. Let us be present in every field acquired slowly but surely, those which can be carried through at this time and which bit by bit create another mentality.

Let us not stay with the past but move into the present. Institutions, mentalities and situations evolve very rapidly. That which has lasted for decades sometimes crumbles like a house of cards. Let us adjust ourselves to the reality of today, otherwise, without our noticing it, we will end up jousting with windmills.

Do you want a simple translation of truth, love, unity? "May the Good News be the grand passion of our family. May it be a link, the crucible of communion reaching beyond ecclesial and other barriers! May justice be for our family an irrevocable bias. May she be able to say with St. Paul: 'Jesus Christ is Lord and we are your servants for the sake of Jesus.'"

Tomorrow we will enter a new century. It is there at our doorstep. I am sure that we will have to profit to a greater degree from the spiritual and apostolic experience of the other Assumptionist families, different manifestations of the same ground swell, the passion for the Kingdom of God in an Augustinian line. Their convictions can stimulate us all the more because they agree with our own preoccupations, sometimes more vigorously.

“There lives in our heart a unique passion which has two poles:

- passion for Christ; he calls us to follow him in the path of his incarnation. He gives us a share in his work of salvation.

- passion for his people, impoverished and relegated to the lowest place. This people of the poor, loved by God with a preferential love, that is the portion we have inherited.” (General Chapter of the Little Sisters of the Assumption, 1987).

Energized by our spirit

We are happy to be Assumptionists and we love our family, but generally speaking we understand poorly our spirit reduced, as it is in the mind of the greater number, to a few essential traits. We live but a small part of its richness. Influenced by the exigencies of the Conciliar renewal, active craftsmen of a Church confronted by formidable challenges, there were many of us who left aside our own sources, even though we faithfully brought into play our heartily adopted Rule of Life. The Assumptionist spirit often limits itself to the most recent texts, the most meaningful, and the most comprehensible. Furthermore, many of the texts of our founder and of the outstanding personalities in our history are available only in French. Finally, almost everywhere the study of our sources is linked to the initial period of our formation. Those who use the *Ecrits spirituels* as their bedside book are rare. The Directory is hardly ever referred to. And the “Spirit of Assumption according to Father d’Alzon,” which has been translated into five languages, did not spark a craze.

Texts are only an entrance door. In bygone days there were others. Alumniates and well-structured scholasticates provided an Assumptionist bath for many years. Our works were venerable institutions, weighed down with experience, reinforcing identity, and strengthening “esprit de corps” in those countries where Assumption was prosperous and highly respected.

Today it is no longer so. Assumption moves away more and more from its geographical birthplace. Its sons must live its spirit in countries which have nothing in common with 19th century France. And that spirit must be a source of inspiration for reinventing the Assumptionist dynamism in new contexts.

Our 150 years should help us to know our spirit better and to better live it, like the last anniversary, the centenary of the death of Father d'Alzon, had already given us the occasion to do so. We have come a ways since then, and our founder is better known than he was at that time. But we are not even halfway to the final goal: to refer spontaneously to our spirit and spirituality in making our choices and our priorities for today. If the spirit is not a driving mechanism, a school of life and action, it is petrified and plays no inspirational role. It needs to be reactivated at Assumption. Many Congregations are preceding us along this path.

We do not exploit our own resources which we sometimes do not even suspect. We communicate them even less. So we will have to explore this wealth as we celebrate our 150 years and to bring them up to date in meetings, retreats, monographs and publications. We also need to absorb them, to assimilate them so as to be able in turn to communicate them. "The Passion for the Kingdom of God in the World of our Time" was appreciated: our spirit took flesh, became meaningful and enlightening. May volunteers get to work without delay to attempt other essays. The lay people who desire to share our spirit await them even more than we.

Lay people motivated as much as we

Since we are accustomed to living among ourselves and to deciding by ourselves, we have some difficulty in treating lay people as real partners, especially if we insist, without sufficient reason, in retaining the control levers. I feel that we must invent new forms of partnership which will be respectful of these two ecclesial vocations which are indispensable one to another. If not, age abetting and it is already here, we are going to withdraw within ourselves. And we will let the chance go by for new forms of spiritual mutual support and for shared mission at the service of renewed evangelization. In my view, every attempt at research opening into common action must be encouraged. I find always pertinent the suggestions that I made in my letter #9 on lay-religious collaboration.

I would also hope that we be less timid about exporting our spirit beyond the frontiers of our group. Not that I insist that Assumption open a stand in the great bazaar of religious and spiritual propositions. But to be obliged to communicate one's spirit to others who are especially

familiar with the language is the best way to make it one's own and to assimilate it; that's well-known. And above all lay people will construct a different edifice than we with materials that are nonetheless common. This long-term undertaking will mark the end maybe of our monopoly on the interpretation of a spirit destined for consecrated persons; it is true, but the broadening which will come of it will be beneficial for all. Several of us have courageously dived into the water. Will the rest of us dare to support and imitate them?

I remain persuaded that a religious family born of a valid intuition which does not succeed in actively interesting lay people in its spirit and its spirituality will more and more experience difficulty in clearing certain hurdles. Assumption is basically apostolic: she is not called to withdraw into herself but rather to draw others along in her wake without fearing that they will take over as long as they are cut out for and have the taste for adventure.

A life-size project for the Province

In our more than one-hundred-year history, will the year 2000 be a year that should be marked with a white stone as one particularly fertile in innovations? Why not! But innovations are born of a coherent policy quite difficult to design without a Province-wide project. I realize all the objections that such an idea raises. How can one speak of projects when decline is the only prospect on the horizon and we can anticipate only the withdrawal of the few troops still active? How can one speak of projects when no one is there to take charge of them and bring them to happy conclusions? And in those Provinces where there is still a small margin of manpower, the unexpected and the problems of health disrupt all expectations and discourage people from making any plans so much do they appear theoretical and fragile. How can anyone turn a deaf ear to these difficulties which are only too real?

Nevertheless, I continue to plead for the design of a Province-wide project, there where there is none, and for its periodic updating. I dare not define it; it would be too ambitious, as "a short, medium and long term plan of apostolic and missionary action to mobilize the human, spiritual and financial powers of a Province, with an eye to the future." But I would not hesitate to say that it is necessary "in order to have a grasp on the future, to create something new and some signs of hope, to give meaning to our lives as religious, that the Province live out a situation of aging, even of death, or else one of strong growth."

History quite often upsets our plans. Sickness, sudden forks in the road strike men on whom we counted and wipe out our projects. Everything has to be started over! So it's quite normal that

we get discouraged at times! But even in such situations, a Province-initiated project helps us to step back, to not make spot decisions, to weigh the stakes of such and such an option. In the absence of a project, necessity is law, that is to say the most immediate need becomes imperative to the detriment of less urgent but decisive needs for the future which require preparation and investment. A Provincial project, which was mapped out in broad terms at the Provincial Chapter and had finishing touches put to it in the Council of the Province, that is a common reference point for all, making decisions easier in the measure that the priorities settled on are listed and hierarchized. In the absence of any project at all, we run the risk of scattering our shots. While what we need is to widen the field, to anticipate the future, to see far enough ahead to take a well-thought-out decision.

I know how much the lack of replacements lies heavily upon us; how much heavier and heavier is our progressive aging. But the absence of all initiative accentuates the impression of lingering death. It is only at the point of death that we can accept to never again imagine, never again propose, never again create anything. A Province-wide project helps us to maintain our spiritual and apostolic life right up to the end.

Does such a plea have a rightful place in a letter preparing the 150th anniversary of Assumption? Certainly. We can deplore many shortcomings in our history, but we have never sinned by excessive analysis and strictness in our forecasts. It is a tremendous responsibility to pledge the future of men and institutions. More today than in the past there are required data and criteria worked out in collaboration and guaranteeing the trustworthiness of a decision, but not its infallibility for all that. A Province-wide project is a solid basis for guiding one to the best choices at a given moment. On condition that we be not satisfied just with great priorities: they will not develop into reality except through clear objectives backed up by the means and strategies to achieve them.

To work for the coming of the Kingdom, to involve one's brothers in that mission by assigning them in the best possible way presupposes today the acceptance of a method and its constraints. Improvisation was never in high regard with Father d'Alzon, meticulous as he was in all that he did.

Stringency is not in opposition with disinterested service of the Kingdom. So conceived and with the ratification of the Chapter, a Province-wide project allows us "to find together the motivations which give us a taste for action and arouse a passion for the Kingdom whatever be our age and our history."

Expectations for the 150th anniversary

The third millennium, the Jubilee, the Chapters: numerous events are going to take up our time these next few years while we will need to carry on our work. Our own anniversary must not be eclipsed for all that. Let us reserve for it a portion of our energy without throwing ourselves into foolhardy ventures. Let us fit that energy into the much broader framework of the turning of the century, of the Jubilee and of the Chapters. Let us underline the common points of these orientations and themes reserved for these great demonstrations since by different roads they all are going in the same direction and to the same point of convergence. Booklets composed by us will help us to live these parallel preparations in a unified manner.

The General Council does not have the means, all by itself, to take charge of the celebration of our present and of our past. One of us will preside over the small international Commission given the task of eliciting initiatives and executions and of coordinating them. It will, therefore, appeal considerably for the collaboration of the Provinces and the participation of the religious.

What possible manifestations are we looking to? Presently we are only at the stage of early suggestions. Here are a few of them for example:

- An opening celebration and a closing one of a certain magnitude in each Province with the presence of our collaborators and our partners.

- A more solemn world-wide inauguration in the setting of the General Chapter.

- A high-quality exhibition presenting in different languages the Assumption family, its charism and its spirituality. It could be used later on at other occasions: professions, ordinations, vocation days, meetings....

- The formulation at the General Chapter of a quite detailed apostolic program: "Project Assumption 2000."

- A videocassette: "Roots for the future." How do we live out our passion for the Kingdom of God? What future achievements do we foresee?

- Some exhibits to be dreamed up of a few slices of our history to familiarize ourselves with it.

We don't lack ideas. The men to carry them out are harder to find. But we are only at the beginning. Certain intuitions will take shape progressively thanks to your imagination and your dynamism.

Let's move

Let us take advantage of this anniversary to make ourselves known and talked about. No need to cultivate the nostalgia of the past as if the beautiful years were forever behind us. Let us put down our roots more deeply in our own tradition and history: sap comes from the roots. Let us make of our past a trampoline for the future. Nourished by the past, an anniversary is turned toward the future. The Apostolic exhortation *Vita consecrata* stresses tremendously creative faithfulness in a way that no other official document had ever done. Will we allow this call to resound in us?

We have texts at Assumption and even some very beautiful ones. Their conclusions are well in harmony with concrete situations. But we lack the method and the tenacity to implement those beautiful orientations. Of course there will always be a gap between what is asked for and what is practiced. But if we wish to make any progress, we must change that attitude and our ways of doing things. The daring of some of our elders who have given up their security to embark on a daring venture is an example for us all. They are the first to be astonished by the transformation that has taken place in themselves.

Assumption must mobilize herself to cross the critical passage that we are going through today, you will understand. I pray that such will be the grace of her 150th anniversary.

Father Claude Maréchal

Superior General

Rome July 21, 1997