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The Assumptionists and the Work for Christian Unity

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THE ASSUMPTIONISTS AND THE WORK FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

The present paper is devoted to a survey of some facts which have played their part—and no small one—in the history of the movement for Christian unity. At the present time, however, it may seem an unattractive subject. For the world situation, particularly the persecution of the Church in Eastern Europe, has put a stop to many an Assumptionist activity in regard to work for Christian unity. Accordingly, the Assumptionists' apostolate in this field is partly on the decline; with hope of resurgence, no doubt—but on the decline all the same. This is due to international circumstances for which no one in particular is responsible, and also to the special methods adopted by the Assumptionists in their approach to questions of unity.

The latter point of view—concerning their method—is very important. Working for Christian unity requires some kind of theology of unity, principles which have been thought out quietly before being applied in practice. The Church has a definite doctrine on her own unity; but, even then, that doctrine has several aspects, and in dealing with reunion, either theoretically or in practice, one may lay stress upon one or another of them. None is excluded; there is still room, though, for diverse emphases. Precisely, the manner in which the Assumptionists have been carrying out their aim as regards Church unity, was at times criticized in a way which questioned the value of some at least of their principles. Now, these are derived from the circumstances in which the Assumptionists undertook work for Christian unity for the first time, and these circumstances were peculiar.

To explain all this succinctly but exactly, the paper will be divided into three parts:—the origin of the Assumptionists' concern for unity; a survey of their achievements in the past, with a glance at the present situation and the changes that have lately taken place; finally, we will briefly suggest what principles have guided and still guide them.

There are Orders or Congregations which have taken up work for Christian unity, as it were, incidentally. Founded in view of another aim or in times when there was no acute problem of unity or reunion, they have been led by circumstances to be concerned about Christian unity and have eventually devoted to that work a more or less important part of their activities. On the other hand, other Congregations have always been dealing with questions of unity. From the start their founder himself directed their thoughts and cares towards such problems; or special circumstances at the time of their inception imperiously orientated them towards that kind of apostolate. A typical instance of the latter case would be, e.g., the Fathers of the Atonement in America, a community of non-Catholic obedience which joined the Catholic Church: its

members are providentially ear-marked for work for Christian unity.

As for the Assumptionists, I would not hesitate to say that they come under the second heading: their concern for Christian unity dates back to their very origin, and work in that sense is an essential part of their apostolic duties as a Congregation. Individual members may be employed with other kinds of apostolate—many are, in point of fact—nonetheless, if the Congregation as such is to remain faithful to the aim devised for it by its founder, it must, in some way or other, tend to promote Christian unity.

The Congregation of the Assumptionists was founded in 1850, in a college at Nîmes in southern France, by Fr. Emmanuel D'Alzon, vicar-general for the diocese of Nîmes. At the very first, all its members were teachers. As early as 1862, however, that is, twelve years after their foundation, the Assumptionists received from the pope himself, Pius IX, the order to work for the reunion of the Eastern Churches, and more particularly in Bulgaria. In 1862 Bulgaria was still part of the Ottoman Empire; nationalist feelings and desire for political independence were rapidly growing, while the Bulgarian Orthodox clergy—hitherto under the jurisdiction of Greek bishops appointed by the œcumenical patriarch—strongly wished to have their own Bulgarian bishops and to use Slavonic instead of Greek in the liturgy. To attain their end, part of the clergy favoured reunion with Rome. After preliminary talks with Archbishop Hassoun, head of the Armenian Catholics, an act of union was agreed upon and signed, and a first practical step towards unity was made when Pius IX, on April the 8th, 1861, consecrated bishop the aged archimandrite, Mgr. Sokolsky. Then, on 18th June the same year, Bishop Sokolsky was kidnapped on board a Russian boat, taken to Russia and confined to a monastery.

As will be expected, such an occurrence practically brought to an end the proposed union and, moreover, greatly affected the morale of Bulgarian Catholics. There were in Bulgaria two small Catholic bodies, one following the Byzantine rite headed by one bishop, the other under two bishops, belonging to the Latin rite. It was important that these two communities should be able to keep pace with the times and to take part in what promised to be an important religious and national revival. The idea of the pope, then, was not only to nominate another bishop—eventually, Bishop Popov, but furthermore to send to Bulgaria a religious Congregation with the definite task of strengthening the position of Catholics, particularly, though by no means exclusively, of Catholics of Byzantine rite.

The choice of the pope fell upon the Assumptionists. This raises a question: why did the pope select them, who had only just been founded, rather than a more important Congregation? No ultimate answer can be given; but there is an explanation which has a high degree of probability. For one thing, Pius IX knew the founder personally. That is not enough, obviously, to

justify such a step; but it may have been one of his motives, if it is true that he had in mind special views on the best means of tackling Eastern questions. Practically, the Assumptionists had not yet tried their hand at any specialized form of apostolate, with the only exception of teaching; as a consequence, they were not likely to be impeded by previous customs or *a priori* ideas. And what was impending with the coming independence of Bulgaria, was in fact an entirely new situation, which had to be handled with yet untried methods. A complementary motive may have been that, were a Congregation to be sent to Bulgaria, it should be looked upon favorably both by the Turkish Government and by the Bulgarians : the best means to ensure both conditions—which was difficult enough—was to send a religious family which had not yet been, so to speak, ‘compromised’ elsewhere, which was not heralded by any particular reputation, simply because it had as yet no reputation.

Be that as it may, the founder himself, Fr. D’Alzon, travelled to Constantinople in 1863 to study the facts on the spot and report to the Holy See on what he considered would be the best way of meeting the many difficulties confronting the Catholic communities. On his return, a report was presented to the Congregation ‘De Propaganda Fide’ (at that time, the Congregation ‘Pro Ecclesia Orientali’ existed only as a branch of the Congregation ‘De Propaganda Fide’). Two main moves were advocated: on the one hand, the foundation of regular seminaries for Byzantine priests, in order to strengthen the Catholic clergy; on the other, the opening of elementary and secondary schools to help to the development of Catholic influence in general. As it happened, this met the views of the pope, and the outlined programme became, accordingly, the authoritative guide of the Assumptionists in the East.

Before reviewing what was realized in fact, let us quote Fr. D’Alzon himself. There is an entry in his personal papers, dated 22nd December 1863, which shows that from that date, i.e., shortly after his journey to Constantinople, he considered the work for unity as a special function entrusted to his Congregation. It also suggests that he had thought of a third manner of working for unity, which had not been put down in the report, probably because he conceived of it not so much as a separate means as rather a necessary background to the two proposals he had sponsored. ‘Our Congregation has the reunion of the Eastern Churches as its own aim...; this more especially entails humility and charity, to counteract the spirit of pride and division which has rent to pieces the garment of Christ, and obedience to the visible head of the Church; it requires also a number of conditions, a study of the Eastern languages, the Canons, ecclesiastical history, the rites and theology proper’. The founder already envisaged a properly intellectual apostolate which would promote Christian unity by means of an objective study of the history and the theology of the Eastern Churches.

Fr. D’Alzon died in 1880. Since his work for the Christian East dates back to 1863, he had less than twenty years to organize an active apostolate: he therefore could not do much. Furthermore, his Congregation was only beginning. When he died in 1880, the number of

religious, altogether, did not go beyond forty-three—among them were no more than twenty-seven priests; and that, it must be admitted, is a small number for any great venture.

Of the two items of the report presented to the Holy See, only one was applied immediately. For some reason or other, the foundation of seminaries had to be postponed, whereas the organization of schools started at once. During the founder's life two schools were opened, one at Plovdiv in 1864, another at Adrianople in 1868. More important, however, because it entailed a far-reaching immediate influence, was the nomination of an Assumptionist as vicar-general for the Catholic diocese of Byzantine rite in Bulgaria. From 1865 to 1885, Fr. Galabert held that function and exercised a great influence upon the Catholic clergy of Byzantine rite; his role was particularly noticed at the Council of the Vatican, in 1870, to which he came as theological adviser to a number of Eastern bishops.

During the founder's life, the application of his ideas had been made but slowly. [\[1\]](#) That was to be expected, for the situation in Bulgaria was so different from anything else in the West that caution was absolutely necessary if any foundation was to last. After 1880, on the contrary, everything developed rapidly and the Assumptionists' apostolate for unity took on its definite character, the one it still has and by which it is easily to be distinguished from other attempts.

The principle put down by the founder, to promote Catholic influence by schools, is maintained. The other principle he had advocated, that of forming seminaries for the Byzantine rite, is applied. The third principle, which the founder had entered in his private notes—namely, to start upon a systematic and scholarly study of things Eastern, is also put into practice. A fourth principle is adopted : that of taking charge of parishes of either rite and, accordingly, to adopt the Byzantine rite whenever needed. At the same time, instead of restricting their efforts to Bulgaria, the Assumptionists set up houses on similar lines in other countries also, Turkey, Russia, Yugoslavia and Greece. To have a good idea of it all, we will firstly consider the more popular kind of apostolate, and afterwards the properly intellectual activity.

In 1880, at the death of Fr. D'Alzon, the Assumptionists had two elementary schools in Bulgaria, as well as the vicar-general for the Byzantine rite. Under the second superior general, Fr. F. Picard, the schools took much more importance. The elementary school which had originally been opened at Plovdiv was replaced in 1884 by a big secondary school, St. Augustine's College, which quickly became the most influential establishment of its kind in the country and, for all practical purposes, the centre of Catholic life in Bulgaria. Up to its suppression some years ago, it became more and more important and, in the years between the two wars, occupied in Bulgarian life a place which is somewhat similar to that of a public school in English life, though of course in a very different atmosphere. The school at Adrianople was also

transformed (1890) into a secondary school, St. Basil's College. Other schools were opened at Varna, a seaside resort on the Black Sea, and at Sofia, the capital, where, however, it was handed over to the Brothers of the Christian Schools a few years later.

While the development of their school scheme was taking place, the Assumptionists started founding seminaries. In 1880 a minor seminary for boys of various rites was opened in Adrianople; in obedience to a brief from Leo XIII, *Adnitentibus Nobis* (2nd July 1895), it was reorganized in 1895 and henceforth received exclusively Bulgarian boys of Byzantine rite. Since the aim in view was to give more confidence and position to the Byzantine clergy, it meant that all the teachers, something like eight or nine Assumptionists at the start, adopted the rite. At the same time (1896) a corresponding major seminary was established, also for Bulgarians, at Kadi-Koy, in the neighbourhood of Constantinople.

To this twofold activity, teaching in schools and seminaries, another was added: the taking over of parishes in order to supply for the scarcity of secular priests. This meant also adopting the Byzantine rite and it entailed all kinds of initiatives tending to help the clergy, as for instance the forming of lending libraries, retreat houses, diverse associations... Finally an attempt was made, rather timid and on a popular scale, at launching a Catholic press, with two or three magazines.

So far, we have had only Bulgaria in view. Since it was the first country where the Assumptionists worked for Christian unity, it naturally became a model for their work elsewhere. They extended their field of action, but the technique remained the same: opening of schools, elementary and secondary, to gain more influence among the people at large, the formation of major and minor seminaries to help the local clergy in its recruitment and training, taking over of parishes.

The next country into which the Assumptionists penetrated was Turkey. To consider Turkey as a country different from Bulgaria, is true today, but at the time we speak of, it was not exact as far as frontiers are concerned, since Bulgaria was still included in the Ottoman Empire.

Constantinople was an important metropolis, grouping peoples of different national origin, now mainly Greeks and Turks, formerly many Bulgarians also. In 1880, the Assumptionists opened a house at Koum-Kapou in the old Byzantium; to it was joined a minor seminary for various rites which, in 1896, was exclusively reserved to Greek-speaking boys of Byzantine rite. This seminary was transferred near Athens at the beginning of the first world war, and was suppressed at the end of the war, when the Catholic clergy of Greek rite took charge of their

own seminary.

A number of parishes of both rites were opened in Turkey, some in Turkey in Europe, Koum-Kapou, Gallipoli, others in Turkey in Asia, Kady-Koy, Phanaraki, Brusa, Ismidt, Esky-Cheir, Konyah, Zonguldak... Furthermore, the Assumptionists took the rather bold step of transferring to Turkey their own novitiate and scholasticate: a novitiate was established at Phanaraki (1896–1904) and a scholasticate at Kady-Koy (1896–1914). This proved to be the beginning of an important intellectual apostolate.

After Bulgaria and Turkey, the Assumptionists tried Russia. They first entered Russia in 1903, but could do no more than organize some sort of outposts. As neither schools nor parishes were looked upon favourably by the Russian Government, they were reduced to start student-hostels or mere chapels which did not have the status of a parish. Altogether, five posts were established, in what is now Leningrad, in Odessa, Vilno (now in Poland), Kiev and Makiewka, in the mining district of the Donetz. After the Bolshevik Revolution only one father was able to remain. Fr P. Neveu lived at Makiewka until 1926; he was then secretly consecrated bishop and sent to Moscow to take charge of the Catholics in the Soviet capital, where he stayed till 1936. In that year, after a journey to Rome and Paris, he was refused the necessary return visa. In 1935 he had been joined by an American Assumptionist who came in the official capacity as chaplain to the American embassy. This father, Fr. L. Braun, lived in Moscow throughout the war, after which his place was taken by another American. In 1947 an agreement was passed between the French and Russian Governments, in virtue of which a second Assumptionist, a Frenchman, was allowed to go to Moscow, to take charge of the only Catholic church in the city. He was recently expelled.

Since we are dealing with Russia, we may mention here an ill-fated attempt which took place during the last war, when an Assumptionist was sent from Rumania to Odessa, at a time when the Rumanian army was occupying the town. That father re-opened a Catholic chapel and stayed in the city after the Russian victory. What happened to him afterwards is obscure. It seems that he was left alone for about a year; he was then brought to trial on some pretext or other and condemned: as far as is known, he is still alive but working in a concentration camp.

The next country into which the Assumptionists were admitted was Rumania. In 1923 two religious started a minor seminary and a public chapel (Byzantine rite) at Blaj, centre of the Byzantine Catholics in Transylvania. In 1924 the bishop of Oradea, Msgr. Frentiu, invited them to help run a secondary school at Beius, where they opened a public chapel and a minor seminary. In 1934 a residence was founded in Bucharest, with the main idea of contacting members of the University, professors and students. No parishes were ever taken, for the

secular clergy are more numerous than in Bulgaria: all that was needed was some kind of intellectual activity in the diverse spheres of teaching, which the secular clergy were not able to undertake easily.

After Rumania, Yugoslavia: in 1925 a parish was founded in Belgrade, the capital. This, with the residence going with it, is the only house in Yugoslavia. It is still active at the present time.

After Yugoslavia, Greece. The opening of a religious house in Athens dated back to 1934. But that was not the first time that the Assumptionists had been in touch with Greeks. In Turkey itself they ministered among many residents of Greek origin and language. They had had at Koum-Kapou a minor seminary for Greek boys which was transferred to the neighborhood of Athens during the first war, so that for about five years (1914-1919) there had been several Assumptionists near Athens. Nevertheless, that had always been considered as temporary. Another point however, needs mentioning: in 1912 an Assumptionist had been appointed Latin archbishop of Athens. Fr. L. Petit had been entrusted some time before with the organization of a synod of Armenian bishops: the efficacy of that synod and the wide knowledge of all Eastern problems that Fr. Petit displayed brought him to the fore. He was archbishop of Athens from 1912 to 1926 when he retired. He died a year later, 1927, with the title of archbishop of Corinth. Now, Adage Petit had always kept with him two or three Assumptionists as secretaries, so that Athens had been in fact a center of Assumptionist influence long before the formal opening of a house there. This came in 1934, with a residence in Athens, which comprised at first a kind of apostolic school—with Latin rite only. Several Latin parishes were adopted later on: at Pireaus, Naxos, Volo, and a novitiate for Assumptionist recruits had recently been opened at Naxos. The influence of the Assumptionists has also grown with the consecration of one of them as bishop. Fr. A. Vuccino, a Hellene-born Assumptionist, had been secretary to Msgr. Petit in Athens. In 1937 he became Latin bishop of Syros, an island in the Cyclades, and in 1945 was promoted to Corfu as archbishop.

We have now finished with the expansion of the Assumptionists' apostolate for the reunion of Christendom as far as the East is concerned. [\[2\]](#) There remains to consider their more intellectual kind of apostolate. Its ultimate goal is of course, like all work for Christian unity, apostolic, but its immediate aim is strictly scholarly: it tends at publishing first hand studies of Oriental theology, particularly from a historical point of view. As we have seen, the founder of the Assumptionists, Fr. D'Alzon, had that sort of work in view as early as 1863; it was put into practice in 1897.

As professor in the Assumptionist study-house established at Kady-Koy, Msgr. Petit had made Eastern theology and history his speciality and in 1897 he launched a review devoted to those

subjects. A few fathers were later detached from the scholasticate, formed the 'Institut Français d'Etudes Byzantines' and set to work exclusively upon the history and theology of the Eastern Churches. Little by little, an extensive library was gathered. The review, called at first *Échos d'Orient*

is now known as

Revue des Etudes Byzantines

; it is a quarterly published in French and has achieved a worldwide fame for its high standard of scholarship. In 1937, on account of difficulties in Turkey, that centre of studies was moved to Bucharest, and again, in 1946, from Bucharest to Paris.

In practice the Assumptionist scholars working at the Byzantine studies number four or five at the centre itself—now, Paris—and a varying number of others in diverse houses. They have acquired a great influence: by the review itself, by the books published, by the part taken in the foundation of the Oriental Institute in Rome, which is now run by the Society of Jesus, by their prominence in the International Congresses of Byzantine Studies, and by their teaching Oriental theology in some Catholic Universities. To give one instance of their achievements, we may mention that the only detailed synthesis of Oriental theology ever published is due to an Assumptionist (*Theologia Ecclesiarum Orientalium*, in five volumes, by Fr. M. Jugie) . The present director of the group, Fr. V. Laurent, is one of the few specialists of Byzantine numismatics; Fr. S. Salaville is a well-known writer on liturgy; Fr. R. Janin is a recognized authority on the topography of Byzantium; and Fr. V. Grumel—to cite a few names—on the history of the patriarchate of Constantinople.

It is noteworthy that these scholars desired to remain in touch with a practical apostolate. In 1922 they inspired the launching of a quarterly of information on the Eastern Churches, called *L'Union des Eglises*

, a title which was altered later to

L'Unité de l'Eglise

. It was published in France till 1938.

What has happened to those various activities in recent years makes a sad tale. Of all the countries considered, only Greece and Turkey are on our side of the 'Iron Curtain'. In all others, great changes are to be expected. That is not all, for Turkey too, after the first war, underwent a revolution, which progressively tried to wipe out all religious propaganda. The régime instauré by Kemal Ataturk was definitely hostile to all religions. It was thus in Turkey that difficulties started and houses were, perforce, closed down. Today there are no more than two houses left in Turkey, one in Kady-Koy and one in Ankara, the capital; the Institute of Byzantine Studies left Kady-Koy for Bucharest in 1937.

The communist governments in a number of other countries have also, and more recently, obliged the Assumptionists to suppress other houses. In Russia, there is now one American religious in Moscow. In Bulgaria the great college at Plovdiv was closed in 1948 after a bill had been passed concerning private schools, and all non-Bulgarian fathers were expelled. As for the Bulgarian religious, they are running, in Plovdiv, the only seminary which is tolerated by the authorities and have taken temporary charge of some parishes which used to be staffed, before the expulsions, by Passionists of Dutch nationality. In Rumania, the plight is worse. Schools have been forcibly expropriated and non-Rumanian fathers expelled, while the Rumanian religious are in hiding or in prison, all their houses and chapels having been confiscated. In Yugoslavia, some Yugoslav religious are still in the parish in Belgrade.

A result of such events has been that the Assumptionist houses on the continent, in France, Belgium or Holland, have on their staff a number of priests who have spent years in the East and remain interested in their former work. Accordingly, more than in the past, the Assumptionists are directing their thoughts towards labouring for unity in these countries. Hitherto, they were busy in the East itself; now that the East has closed its door, some of them are being active in the West, though, it goes without saying, with other methods. That is particularly to be noticed in Holland and France. In Holland they founded in 1948 a quarterly devoted to the Eastern Churches, *Ilet Christelijk Oosten*. In France, Paris is now the seat of the Institute of Byzantine Studies, and an Assumptionist is secretary to the French edition of *Unitas*, the Roman magazine for questions concerning unity.

We would like to conclude by bringing to light upon what principles the Assumptionists have, to all appearances, based their approach to the problems of Christian unity. An apostolate on such a large scale as theirs cannot but rest upon clear-cut ideas and be controlled by them. In the present case, five points seem prominent.

The first principle would be that, as regards Christian reunion, the Eastern—and more particularly the Byzantine—Churches should be given top-priority. The Assumptionists have houses in England, Holland and America, but they have never attempted anything in these non-Catholic countries that bears comparison with their effort in the East.

Secondly, they think—although this could not be put into practice by everybody and is not meant to be exclusive—that it is more urgent to go to the East and work for unity there than to write or talk about it here. Obviously, to make propaganda for unity is needed everywhere, for everywhere there are prejudices. Nevertheless, more important is the work done on the spot: it gives a better knowledge of conditions and mentality in the East, and it is, perhaps, more

immediately effective.

Thirdly, their practical method consists of strengthening the existing structure of the Catholic communities, to whatever rite these belong. Where the Byzantine rite is practised we should do our best to promote its better knowledge and to ensure the development of a Catholic life founded upon that rite and the theology which underlies it. We could not, however, limit ourselves to that: owing to historical circumstances, the Latin rite is, too, practised in the East, mainly, though not exclusively, by groups of central European origin, which, like the Byzantine Catholics, need to be ministered to and supported. That means maintaining and developing both rites.

Fourthly, one may surmise that such a practice implies a certain notion of rite. A rite is related with a culture from which it has evolved. In the case of the Byzantine rite, the culture of the Byzantine Empire provides the historical source of its main characteristics. But is a rite necessarily linked with a modern national culture? To come to a point, is a Rumanian Catholic who worships according to the Byzantine rite more at one with the history and the present 'mind' of his country than his Catholic neighbour who worships according to the Latin rite? Many—I suppose—would say, yes. In the main, the Assumptionists would say, not necessarily—because a rite, say, for Rumania, whether it is Byzantine or Latin, is the outcome of the theological culture of a medieval society, in one case the Byzantine Empire, in the other the Frankish Empire, neither of which is identical with modern Rumania. Consequently, in their use of the rites, whether Byzantine or Latin, the Assumptionists are guided by empirical circumstances: they use them as local customs, without any prejudice either way.

Finally, the Assumptionists insist time and again upon the objective value of doctrinal and historical truth. In working for unity—to whatever communion one may belong—it is possible to uphold two attitudes. Some would rather lay stress upon a suitable union of hearts within diverging doctrinal views, whereas others would emphasize the necessity of doctrinal unity even to achieve complete union of hearts. The Assumptionists have definitely adopted the latter attitude. Hence an insistence that theological and historical studies are a necessary prerequisite to a lasting reunion. By a better knowledge of the circumstances which brought schism about, an effective method for healing it may be discovered; and by assimilating the doctrinal tradition of the Eastern Churches—such as it is to be found in its great Doctors—we shall ultimately show that, on the whole, it is radically identical with the Latin tradition: they are two distinct expressions of the same faith.

[1] In May 1865, Fr. D'Alzon, helped by Mother Emmanuel Mary Correnson, founded a Congregation of nuns, the Oblate Sisters of the Assumption, destined to labour in Eastern Europe by teaching and good works of all kinds. Fr. D'Alzon also organized a confraternity of prayers for Christian unity under the patronage of Our Lady of Sorrows. This was transformed in 1898, by Leo XIII, into an 'Archconfraternity primaria' under the patronage of Our Lady of the Assumption, which still holds its place in the crusade of prayer for unity.

[2] Among other occasional activities, the Eucharistic Congress held in Jerusalem in 1899 was suggested and planned by the Assumptionists, with the avowed aim of bringing together representatives of the various Catholic rites and promoting better knowledge of the Eastern Churches.