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Mission without Borders

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PREFACE

A call to worldwide mission, our “mission without borders.” This is one of the missionary priorities decided on by the General Chapter of 1993. It is one of the aspects of “our mission after 150 years.” It is also the subject of prayer and reflection for the Congregation as a whole in 1995–1996. And indeed it is the theme of this letter.

The purpose is to help us reach out beyond our borders and broaden our horizons, to open our eyes to the breadth of the mission to the whole world. For evangelization is urgently needed. Whether you call it “new” or “second” evangelization matters little, providing you realize its necessity. How can we speak of Jesus Christ to this complex, interdependent world with its myriad facets, as it awaits the Good News and even searches for it, albeit outside of the mainline Christian Churches?

In forms that differ from those of the past and for renewed reasons, our mission without borders is a necessity. More and more is this true. Religious life, which has always been involved in this intercultural adventure, continues to accept new challenges today. And so does Assumption. In every age, mission in one place or another, whether near or far, has marked our history. In response to obvious needs and to the appeals of superiors, the young and the not-quite-so-young have always agreed to leave their native land for faraway places. Despite blunders and difficulties of all sorts, thanks to their efforts the Church has grown and Assumption has seen its faith, its boldness and its capacity for welcome flourish. After all, whoever ventures into an unknown land and succeeds in being adopted by it and feels at home there, is the first beneficiary. Yet the adventure must constantly begin again, sometimes right on the spot and elsewhere as well.

1. MAKE DISCIPLES OF ALL NATIONS

“Is it not folly to set out for distant lands when there are so few of us young enough to work, when we cannot carry out the task we have here, when we are closing houses? Why go elsewhere when there is so much to do right here, in countries that are constantly becoming less Christian, where the numbers of priests and religious are being meagerly replenished, or when new recruits are nonexistent? ”

The objection is well taken. It crops up in conversation almost everywhere at Assumption, because every Province is being called upon to contribute to distant missions. It so happens that none has fresh troops in reserve. No single province is able to take on a new foundation single-handed. All must spring from interprovincial collaboration. In its desire to be available doesn't a tiny family such as ours bite off more than it can chew? This question to which the General Chapter has in part responded is a legitimate one.

The Present Urgency of Mission

“As the third millennium of Christianity approaches, the Church is making more pressing appeals today than ever before to the long-established Churches, to break loose from their borders, and to open themselves to worldwide missionary activity ” (General Chapter, 1993).

Christian missionary activity has a long history. It begins at the very dawn of Christianity. Do not the Acts of the Apostles recount the preaching of the Word and the missionary zeal of St. Paul, whose blood was to be shed in Rome, the capital of the empire?

Throughout history the underlying motivation has remained the same: to preach the salvation of Jesus Christ which is inseparable from the visible presence of the Church. However, through the centuries the methods and strategies used have differed. Persuasion has sometimes yielded to coercion. Religious intentions have at times camouflaged political aims. The personal acceptance of the people carried little weight because their ruler swept them along, forcing them to share his convictions.

Some Regrettable Facts

Indigenous culture has not always been respected or honored, and the wisdom and religions of the people were unequally recognized and “baptized” in various places and epochs. The history of the Christian mission is not a hymn of glory to enculturation on every page. Linked to European expansionism and ambient colonialism, the evangelization of the American and African continents contains painful episodes that contradict the message being transmitted. In short, the Christian mission is a human-divine story. It can claim a great number of heroes and saints. But it also reveals narrowness of vision and quite un-evangelical intentions. It is a history of leaden weight and airy grace.

Today the Catholic Church has succeeded in freeing itself from temporal powers and their direct or indirect pressures. Her intentions are righteous even though they constantly need to be purified. The Church does not harbor earthly ambition. Her mission is of the spiritual order. She proclaims that Jesus Christ is the one and only Savior. She relates this salvation to the glory of God. By the same token she works for the advancement of the human person and of peoples, and to safeguard the earth’s resources.

A More Far-Reaching and Deeper Mission

During the past thirty years missionary activity in the Catholic Church has been supported by Conciliar and Papal documents of rare quality. The famous Constitutions *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*

,
De activitate missionali Ecclesiae

of Vatican II have greatly enriched our comprehension of the mystery of the Church and of the mission

ad Gentes

. Several popes in succession, John XXIII, Paul VI and John Paul II, have amplified their major

intuitions. Let us at least cite

Evangelium nuntiandi

(1975) and

Redemptoris missio

(1992). Would this not be a good year to reread these fundamental texts? In a certain sense they present the new face of the Church's mission. The plumbing of their doctrinal depth has been very beneficial. The meaning of mission has been made more far-reaching and more profound.

More Far-Reaching, first of all

On a worldwide scale, the Gospel is not known. Asia, the continent with the greatest number of people and a very high birthrate, has scarcely been touched. There Christianity remains an imported product that has not been subjected to enculturation. The growth of the population worldwide is also increasing the disproportion between Christians and non-Christians. "*Mission is a response to the real needs for evangelization of continents like Africa and Asia where entire peoples have not yet heard the Good News*" (1993 General Chapter).

In Greater Depth, Likewise

It is no longer solely a matter of leading men and women to accept the faith and baptism, to obey the commandments and frequent the sacraments. It is no longer sufficient to bring Christian communities into being and to help them grow. From now on, hearts, minds, and institutions must be evangelized. The Gospel must deploy its power of transforming renovation and also its receptiveness, in order to purify and make perfect. Evangelization has a social, cultural, and economic impact. It is concerned with the individual person and his or her environment. It takes into account everything that affects and conditions the person. That is why it is concerned with inter-religious dialogue as well as ecumenism. For the division of the disciples of Christ into separated Churches is a counter-witness. Without neglecting the word and the explicit announcement of the Gospel, evangelization is above all a living testimony. That is all that evangelization is in Islam.

For this reason mission is now an ecclesial, communitarian, and progressive undertaking, more so than it has been in the past. It cannot be the work of a single person. Of course, there is always the missionary lost in the bush, ever ready to recount the thousand vicissitudes of his

exceptional way of life. But mission cannot be reduced to this single image. It encompasses the urban fabric, the media, youth, ethnic conflicts with all their consequences... The typical missionary is not just a man of action, inventive and adventuresome. There is room for other models, for example, the providers of formation who are sought on all sides. The path that leads a local Church from birth to maturity and full development is a long one. In the end, it can count on priests, men and women religious, and all the services that are indispensable to its life and mission. But think of the talents and charisms that are necessary to arrive there!

Everywhere

At Assumption as well as throughout the Church, missionary activity is the task of everyone. We are all called to it. Our Rule is clear. Evangelization requires everywhere and on the part of everyone the same fundamental attitudes (R.L. 23), the same readiness to serve (R.L. 18), the same regular evaluation of the quality of our apostolic work (R.L. 23).

As the General Chapter visualizes it, mission is not reserved for those who set off for distant places, even though the title of missionary is generally applied only to them. "Every Assumptionist is *called to be a missionary*": So begins the text on the mission without borders which strongly supports the Chapter. The mission is the same for all, but some live it out in their native land and others, far from home. They are all bound to one another or should be, since in every instance a mission has been entrusted to them.

"Those who leave their own country are sent by their Provinces. Those who remain ratify this departure since they accept its consequences: additional work, financial solidarity, new assignments, sometimes even the elimination of a community ."

There is no reason to set these two forms of mission in opposition, as if one were more important than the other, or to privilege one of them to the point of sacrificing the other. Mission in one's own country and mission in other lands are to be given equal honor: the two forms rely on and complement each other. Assumption is not an Institute exclusively dedicated to foreign missions. A Province must involve all its resources in the work of mission, but it cannot invest them all in distant lands. If it did, it would imperil its own existence. On the other hand, it cannot invoke its local needs, as real as they may be, to reject all foreign missionary activity. The calls coming from the highest ecclesial authorities as well as from humble pastors are explicit. Every group in the Church must redouble its efforts to lend support to the young churches and pursue the immense missionary task. They are called to share with those who are poorer or simply to

be a sign of the Universal Church. In the Church as well as everywhere else, it is not always those who are richest in personnel and resources who are the most generous!

The Mosaic of Peoples and Cultures

Like the early Apostles, we continue to proclaim Jesus Christ our Savior by calling to conversion: “*So we are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God*” (2 Cor 5:20). Today the Church continues to affirm with St. Peter: “

There is no salvation through anyone else, nor is there any other name under heaven given to the human race by which we are to be saved

” (Acts 4:12). And cleaving to Jesus Christ happens through the response of faith, conversion, and baptism which makes one a member of the Church.

Conversion is not limited to the attitudes of individuals. In God’s initial plan, the world, in the diversity of its peoples and cultures, whatever their forms of expression, is called to be perfected in Jesus Christ who is “*the goal of human history, the focal point of the longings of history and civilization, the center of the human race, the joy of every heart and the answer to all its yearnings*” (Vatican II, The Church in the Modern World, no. 45, U2).

So evangelization embraces the totality of human activity: Christians must let shine forth through them “*the new self, created in God’s way in righteousness and holiness of truth*” (Eph 4:24). “

They must give expression to this newness of life in the social and cultural framework of their own homeland, according to their own national traditions. They must be acquainted with this culture: they must heal it and preserve it; they must develop it in accordance with modern conditions, and finally perfect it in Christ, so that the Faith of Christ and the life of the Church are no longer foreign to the society in which they live, but begin to permeate and to transform it.” (Vatican II, Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church, no. 21). That is how the riches of nations that deploy in time and space the astonishing creative capacity of man converge toward Christ.

Mission does not seek only to increase the number of Christians. It has a much broader goal: to create human relations in conformity with the Gospel which reveal the Kingdom of God: “*The Gospel has truly been a leaven of liberty and progress in human history, even in the temporal*

sphere, and always proves itself a leaven of brotherhood, of unity and of peace
” (Vatican II, Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church, no. 8).

2. IN DISTANT LANDS BEYOND THE SEAS: A PERMANENT FEATURE

Religious life has played a decisive role in the proclamation of Jesus Christ in distant lands and in the implanting of the Church. Assumption, as it has participated in its own small way in the great missionary effort of the 19th and 20th centuries, follows a long tradition. This is true of all its religious, both men and women.

Accredited Evangelizers

Do you want to tell the story of the geographic development of the Catholic Church? At every significant turning point you will encounter the great religious Orders. In every era they have played a decisive, sometimes even an exclusive role because they have been the only missionaries. And those great evangelizing bishops Cyril and Methodius, Boniface and so many others were no exception. They were either monks or religious before they became bishops.

In both Eastern and Western Europe, monasticism has been inseparable from the evangelization of the rural areas. In France, Great Britain, Italy and Russia, to mention only four countries, theirs was a decisive role. Later on, others would take on the task as new horizons opened up, as new routes by land and sea led to more distant places and as the conquest of new continents began to take shape. If you read a history of the missions you will be astonished at the boldness of the apostles of the Kingdom of God, both men and women, in every epoch. As soon as soldiers and traders adventured forth, the missionaries followed in their footsteps. And the latest comers were the most willing to serve and the boldest in seeking the new worlds.

Take the Mendicant Orders, for example: they kept venturing farther and farther, even to China as early as the 13th century. Did someone discover the two Americas? Religious very quickly

took over, and newly founded Regular Clergy like the Jesuits vied with the Mendicant Orders.

Did France and England fling themselves at Africa to cut out immense colonial empires? The missionaries followed, Anglicans and Methodists here, Catholics there. Mowed down in great numbers, sometimes soon after they arrived, they did not give up. Others set out to take their place. And in this way they conquered the terrain foot by foot for Jesus Christ in places where others sought to implant their country's flag. And there was a new flowering both of women's and men's Congregations mobilized in turn by Africa.

The Church owes a great deal to men and women religious. Without them she would not be what she is today. She would limit herself to the old continent. The young churches would not have a place of equality with their elder sisters who are rich with centuries of history. And religious life itself would not have been profoundly renewed in this adventure of faith. It would have failed to accomplish its mission.

For the Church's mission has always been to open up new paths leading to Jesus Christ. To draw peoples to him by revealing him as their Savior. To raise up the Church where she does not yet exist and to root her in soil where she can grow. Indeed, the religious way of life is well adapted to such an adventure: the religious have no family, no ties, while enjoying the support of an international group. But where do they draw the sacred fire that enables them to lose their life for this? In God. Do not look anywhere else. The wellspring of mission is love. Their passion is the Kingdom of God.

Mission, a Preferred Endeavor at Assumption

Anyone who believes that at Assumption "foreign missions" are an afterthought not originally foreseen does not know the first Constitutions. The 1855 Constitutions list, along with teaching, the publication of books, works of charity and retreats, "the foreign missions and the destruction of schism and heresy." The 1865 Constitutions add to the foreign missions: "and everything relating to them." In the words of the commentator, this signifies "all the missionary works to raise funds or recruits in Christian countries...and also the work of the Propagation of the Faith for the foreign missions of which Father d'Alzon was the diocesan director in Nîmes."

The instruction to the General Chapter of 1868, a major text of our Founder, is still more

specific. It is, he says, the love of the Church which inspires in hearts another love, which drives them to witness to Christ to the very ends of the earth. "Yes," he says, "*the foreign missions are our ambition. By what providential choice has it happened that, as few as we are, we have already formed missionaries?*"

He then speaks of the foundation of the Oblate Sisters of the Assumption, who are so closely associated with the missions: "

My daughters, you will go overseas.

" Then speaking of their intention "

to be sanctified like us in an immense and apostolic love of the Church,

" he adds: "

Their hallmark, in this matter, goes deeper than ours.

"

The mission without borders was truly the program of Assumption even from her beginnings. And this global mission includes "the foreign missions." This is not an unwarranted affirmation. As early as December 1860, the first Assumptionist missionaries set out for Australia. They were to stay there only twelve years, as the excessive demands of the bishop forced them to return home. Meanwhile, Assumption had turned toward Eastern Europe to contribute to the "destruction of the schism." The congregation would pour into the Mission to the Orient, according to what was said at the time, a good portion of its personnel and financial resources. As I have written elsewhere, the Mission to the Orient was the epic of Assumption that profoundly marked her character.

Farther and Farther Away

As precious as they were to Assumption, Adrianople, Philipopolis, Istanbul and Jerusalem did not blind it to other horizons. The development of the Mission to the Orient in the Balkans, in Rumania, and even in Russia, which was Father d'Alzon's obsession in his later life, was to be accompanied in every epoch by other implantations in the two Americas, in Asia (Manchuria), in Africa (Zaire and Madagascar). World War II and its aftermath were a serious blow: the recognition of the Communist hegemony over Eastern Europe and the vast areas of China would destroy many hopes. Foreign missionaries were forced to pack their bags against their will, leaving their indigenous brothers in Bulgaria and Rumania under the iron rule of officially atheistic governments.

Other foundations were to follow, including the ones in Madagascar, at Tulear. They were attached to Provinces, as was also the responsibility for personnel and finances for the development of earlier foundations. In a regular manner, religious set out to replenish the ranks

of those who lived and worked in far-off lands. But for lack of recruits they were restricted to small units. There was even fear at one time that the missionary lode had been mined out.

Such was not the case. Events forced us to wake up. In Zaire, in Madagascar, young natives wanted to become Assumptionists. How could their formation be assured? Young religious and some not so young answered the call for several months each year, and even for six years or more. Many of them had never thought of being missionaries. With the breakup of Communism and the rebirth of religious liberty, Rumania, Bulgaria, and Russia opened their doors once more. It was imperative that we support our brothers who had been so courageous during the years of persecution. Once more, young religious and older ones accepted to venture forth to the missions without looking back. The same has been true for Istanbul and Jerusalem.

Could the international Congregation of Assumption remain absent for long from Asia, that rapidly developing human anthill? Three of us accepted to make the leap into the unknown and to open a road that has proven to be even more sinuous than anyone imagined.

In spite of all the difficulties, the story continues. The Provinces born of missionary effort are approached in their turn to participate in it. A Latin-American community should be opening up soon in a country where we have not yet gone. Zaire, which also assumes heavy responsibilities with a very reduced staff, is making inroads in English-speaking Africa and taking charge of the foundation in Tanzania. Spain is sending one of its men to Colombia. The Spirit of Pentecost still breathes. We have good reason to give thanks.

Words and Reality

It is not easy to evaluate the impact of our mission beyond our borders and to appreciate the benefits Assumption has derived from it. The Kingdom of God in its deepest reality escapes our grasp. Besides, there is no history of the Assumptionist mission. Only such a history would enable us to evaluate it fairly. Without it we can only conjecture. In any event, facts and individuals speak. (Cf. the testimonials given in the records of INFO, No. 134, March 1991.)

Let us begin by pointing out that Assumption has always spoken about mission in a very broad sense. This term encompasses our presence in the Orthodox world, the growth of the Church in Latin America, as well as the first proclamation of Jesus Christ and the foundation of the Church

in Africa. In the first two cases the term is inaccurate since the majority of the people are already baptized. This is paradoxical and can even be insulting to our Orthodox brothers who find it painful that we label the European Assumptionists, who go to Russia or Latin America as "missionaries." Having acknowledged this, let us simply use the term in its broadest extension for our present purposes.

To begin with, I would say: let us not embellish the facts. The mission has molded dauntless, courageous, apostolic men. It has been and continues to be a school of holiness. It has given women and men an unaccustomed breadth of vision that they would not have had without it. Yet everything is not light, generosity, selflessness. We have not always been pioneers in our methods of evangelization. Unknowingly imprisoned by our nationalisms, we were not always strong partisans of enculturation. Even when we were very close to various population groups, we were often more spontaneously aware of their limitations than of their qualities and competences. The difficult living conditions have built strong, generous men, but individualism has predominated. Have our choices been sufficiently planned? Have they not too often been improvised? This is not an idle question.

Missionaries, You are to be Thanked

Without us, certain no doubt imperfect local churches would not exist. The gratitude of the various populations to the missionaries is not feigned. They venerate those who made them know Jesus Christ. They see them as their fathers in the faith. It is, therefore, a matter of justice to thank all our former missionaries. I publicly declare to them the gratitude and admiration of Assumption. Without them, she would not have her present-day personality. Thanks to the pioneers who, despite the reticences of their time, took the initiative to welcome sons of their mission lands into Assumption! Thanks to all who followed in their footsteps and who are serving the Gospel far from their homelands!

Thanks also to all those among us who, day after day, work for the mission in the background; some of them assure the bonds that unite and bring comfort; others gather in money and medications and fill the containers. Without a home base no mission is possible! Bravo to all who have accepted this responsibility out of solidarity with their brothers and sisters, for love of the people in the missions, for love of the Lord. Thanks to those who are still setting out today, but also to those who joyfully accept to bear the consequences of the missions and to remain closely linked to their brothers.

It is not an easy decision to set out for years or for a lifetime. It is a deliberate but difficult choice to leave one's family and friends, one's accustomed environment, those thousand little niceties that make life pleasant, and to become part of a very different society. But the one who is uprooted is not the real loser. When love of Christ and a passionate love of his Kingdom are combined with a taste for the unknown and for human relations, then the Gospel adage, "he who loses wins," is proven true once the language barrier has been overcome.

"Those of us who have accepted to leave for a mission outside their native land can live out a new stage of their life there. There is a break with one's habitual milieu, one's relations with others, one's mode of life. But one broadens one's horizons, one also enriches one's experience of God in faith and prayer and rediscovers the heart of one's vocation."
(1993 General Chapter, The Mission Without Borders, 11,2).

We can only repeat what the Chapter has already said: *"When we reread the history of the mission since its beginnings we cannot but marvel at the work accomplished by religious from every land. We give thanks for them and for those who continue to display these same attitudes in our own day."*

3. THE NEW AGE OF MISSION

Assumption participates in the mystery of the Church of which she is a living cell. What is true of the Church is, making all due allowances, true for Assumption. Like the Church, Assumption is at the service of the Good News. Like the Church, she cannot disregard foreseeable developments by refusing to discern the signs of the times. Finally, like the Church, Assumption must bear witness as a multiracial family gathered by the Lord around one and the same spiritual intuition which manifests in its very diversity the gifts of God to all nations. This is an imperative for a Congregation that wants to be faithful to its mission today.

The Gospel and the Signs of the Times

“The foundation of the mission without borders for an Assumptionist is to be found above all in our motto: Adveniat Regnum Tuum. Thy Kingdom Come. That is our Congregation’s reason for being: to work for the coming of the Kingdom in the world” (1993 General Chapter).

The Kingdom of God is not restricted to our human calculations: it is first of all a gratuitous gift. Its coming eludes even our most self-assured strategies. Even so, it requires a sound perspective in the name of God’s interests mobilizing our resources. We need to anticipate the future if we are to have a measurable impact on the present. Wise handling of the present is the way to prepare for the future.

What does our availability to work for the Kingdom demand of us? Every religious and every community must ask this question, foresee where the present is leading us, and discern the signs that foretell the future. This is a difficult but decisive task. That is how our passion for the Kingdom becomes concretely incarnate. Our frame of reference is clear: it includes the mission of Assumption as outlined in the broad orientations of the most recent Chapters, our current missions and our real possibilities; our perception of the present and the future by sizing up the trends of the times.

While Assumption tends to be centered in Western Europe, she must do her part in the evangelization of continents which show very few signs of strong evangelization. She must move out toward new worlds and develop her presence there if she wants to remain open and prepared for universal mission. Otherwise our ways of thinking and feeling will be unduly influenced by Western Europe. That is the reason for our presence in Korea where we are immersing ourselves in a universe unknown to us. That is the chief reason for our implantation in Kenya and Tanzania. We would not be effective apostles to Africa if only francophone temperament and approaches were represented there!

Our African or Latin-American brothers are invited in turn to participate in the universal mission as Vatican II has explicitly requested: *“In order that this missionary zeal may flourish among those of their own homeland, it is very fitting that the young churches should participate as soon as possible in the universal missionary work of the Church, and send their own missionaries to proclaim the Gospel all over the world, even though they themselves are suffering from a shortage of clergy”* (Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church, no. 20).

At the local, provincial, and general levels, the mission is the decisive criterion for evaluating situations and for making indispensable choices. Yet, the most desirable is not always possible. At least we need to make sure that such is the case. Might we not need to be more imaginative and bold?

Maintaining Our Personnel

In Rome, there are more yellow and black religious, both men and women, than there are white. That is a sign. As has been said over and over, religious life is living through a new stage of its age-old history: it is emigrating from the earliest Christianized lands—Europe and North America—toward the young churches of Africa, Asia, and South America. Soon their representatives in many international Congregations will be in the majority. While the consequences of this mutation are foreseen rather than analyzed, they will be important. Already native religious in their own countries are almost equal in number to the religious coming from elsewhere. To give you an idea, here are a few figures: there are 545 Africans out of 1,231 Jesuits in Africa, 587 professed Africans including 293 young men out of the 1,197 Holy Spirit religious in this same Africa.

As the future of the religious life passes to new continents, the Orders sometimes seem to be rivals involved in a race for first place. It's as if their survival depended on how fast they could implant new missions! Maintaining their charism sometimes justifies undertakings whose success is very doubtful. The development of the Orders should avoid competition. It is one thing to accept the regular erosion of personnel passively. It is quite another thing to stem the tide of erosion at the least cost. Why are worldwide numbers of personnel brandished as a title to glory and as a proof of evangelistic competence?

I dare hope that we are not succumbing to this temptation here at Assumption, even if an international Congregation owes it to itself to be present in the young churches in the very name of the evangelical tonality and apostolic life to which it witnesses. It must perceive new harmonics and render present in these new cultures a way of feeling and living the Gospel, a "way of being" in the Church.

Implanting the Charism

Let us never forget that every charism is a spiritual gift given to an individual for the benefit of a group, of a community. This is true of the charism of a foundation. The founder is the first in a line of leaders who inspire both their immediate disciples and those who come later. The spiritual and apostolic path he opens up and which he experiences is received by him as a special grace from God, together with the capacity to describe it and to make others benefit from it after him. On condition, of course, that they re-experience this foundational experience in their own lives in other times and places.

That is why a charism goes beyond the comprehension that a founder has had of it in his lifetime. How could Father d'Alzon have imagined the historical changes, the very concrete conditions of life in Zaire and Madagascar at the end of the 20th century? The birthplace of Assumption was Nîmes in the mid-19th century. It was born in a very specific country, France, in a very distinctive century both politically and religiously speaking, the 19th century. Can Assumption, without losing her identity, incarnate in worlds as different as Holland and Zaire, Brazil and Korea, its spiritual lineage and its mission as experienced and laid out by Father d'Alzon? That is the challenge.

The Real Challenge

There is no question of substituting Africans for Europeans, South Americans for North Americans in order to maintain the number of personnel at about the same level. The challenge is far more demanding. It concerns the entire Assumption Congregation everywhere in the world, but it arises most crucially in the lands where its roots are young and fragile. It is summed up in the famous slogan: "*You are heirs, now become founders.*" Have we assimilated the very heart and spirit of Assumption so as to bring her to life in societies and contexts that are so very different from her land of origin?

Shall we know how to invent in Russia, Rumania, Spain, in Zaire and Madagascar a truly incarnate Assumption that Father d'Alzon would still recognize as basically his own? Our Rule of Life, the works written about our spirit, the orientations of the Chapters, the Letters from the General all point out the road ahead. Only native personnel will be able to bring this undertaking to a successful conclusion. They will need time, faith, deep roots and constancy. It is an undertaking of great magnitude born of a carefully honed evangelical sense and developed through day-by-day fidelity. In her small way, Assumption participates in the great adventure of the religious life at the end of this millennium. How can she, within her own unique tradition, be an evangelical sign in interdependent but clearly distinct societies? What can be her specific contribution to the ecclesial concert? These questions, already of long standing in Western Europe and North America, have not yet been resolved. They are still rather new in the young

churches where they must be asked even more urgently as the environment is being degraded and the evangelical responsibility of religious life is seriously involved. If we don't have the courage to go that far then let us be silent and stop shouting at the top of our lungs that we are men of faith and men of our time. That is easy to say, but hard to live out.

An Interracial Society

The development of the religious life in countries formerly described as the Third World is, as I see it, the great test of truth. It will be a difficult step because nationalisms are not dead, ethnic rivalries are not extinct, and cultures clash before mingling and melding together.

In a complex world like ours religious life cannot expect to play a primary role: neither its resources nor its influence allow this even if its institutions prove themselves sound amidst dilapidated or ravaged societies. But it can be a prophetic sign inasmuch as it is multi-cultural and multi-ethnic. And this is true of Assumption as well. On condition of willing it and taking the necessary steps. This will lead us all into a process of conversion.

Like many other Orders, Assumption is an international grouping. Men from different countries, observing the same Rule of Life, call themselves brothers within it. The great orientations apply to them all, and solidarity is real in many areas. Mutual aid is concrete. For example, some provide money for the benefit of others who are in need of it. Certain obstacles to a very wide-ranging brotherhood are overcome, as the atmosphere of international encounters bears witness. Nonetheless, a great deal of progress is still possible.

- We have gained in mutual respect. No culture claims it can impose its norms as the most universal. Let us not too quickly conclude from this that all imperialism has disappeared or that there are frequent exchanges among men of different nationalities! We limit ourselves to information. We rarely venture further; we do not help one another to progress as well as we might. Should we not go beyond that? Certain tolerances camouflage a fear of conflicts, a fear of probing the truth. Are we not sometimes too benevolent toward one another and not demanding enough?

- Individualism contaminates groups as well as persons. The international experience once linked to formation is becoming the exception today, to the point that the C.A.F.I., those two

months and a half of encounters among the young of various countries, seeks to remedy this deficiency. In a time of recession there is a strong temptation to withdraw within one's own community, one's own Province. When the horizon is limited, interest in others quickly diminishes. We tend to curl up within our own little world, within ourselves.

- The international and interracial communities are crucibles of universal brotherhood. They speak, they witness, often very painfully, for they demand on a daily basis much abnegation and a good dose of humor on the part of all. It is useless to say that the personal factor is as important as the culture itself! Three nationalities represented in a community of three mean there are three very concrete persons who have moreover been fashioned in three different cultures. Great efforts are needed so that gracious listening and respect for persons win out over spontaneous sensitivity, different rhythms of life, very crude or very refined human experience, a broad or a limited openness of spirit, not to mention "*differences in origin, age, and mentalities*" (Rule of life, 8)! And yet, our diversity becomes our riches only at this price.

4. PROGRESS TO BE DESIRED

Russia in 1903, Rumania in 1923, Zaire in 1929, Brazil in 1935, Colombia in 1946, Madagascar in 1953. These and other dates you will find in the album *The Assumptionists* published in ten languages. What progress since our arrival! Bravo to those who reported the great stages of development for each country!

The era of the pioneers has been followed by the era of the builders and trainers of missionaries. After the *jus missionis* came the diocesan clergy, the novitiates for Sisters, the native bishop, the first Assumptionists from the vineyard. Can we fail to give homage to the first Assumptionist bishops, a Neveu in Moscow, a Piérard in Zaire, a Canonne in Madagascar!

The mission territories became dioceses well equipped with churches, schools, hospitals and convents thanks to the builders and the contributions of the "PROCURES" And so they took definite shape. Sectors and vast parishes have been subdivided, diocesan priests have taken

over from the missionaries. And little by little, unequally in various places, native Assumptionists are replacing the missionaries. The “Mission” continues its progress which has never ceased.

I repeat today to many others what I said in 1992 to the A. A. religious of Madagascar: *“I am impressed by the work accomplished since your arrival in this region. Your apostolic rule, your courage, your selflessness, your availability are real. You have made a noble effort to awaken vocations and to provide formation. You are discovering the communitarian dimension of our life. You are deeply concerned with the people of your locality.*

”

Yet, even at that time I was speaking of possible and desirable progress. The 1993 General Chapter for its part formulated certain recommendations relating to the mission without borders. They will be honored, including *“the plan for collaboration among the Provinces and Regions of the same continent to respond to the commitments of the mission of Assumption in our own day.*

” Five efforts need to be emphasized, it seems to me, in order to guarantee the future and to give the evangelical witness that the evolution of situations and mind-sets require. The propositions mentioned here do not seem revolutionary to me. They spring from R. L. 20 which details the availability demanded by our missionary vocation.

It is Still Necessary to Leave One's Native Land

This is not an outdated attitude stemming from another time. Our young Provinces, even when they are already playing their part in the missionary effort, cannot do without the personal and economic assistance of their elders. Our foundations are fragile: they must be given strong support. Let us remember that there is no age when it is best to set out providing one is in good health. Many varied services can be useful.

“To be open to new cultures and to young churches is a grace for apostolic dynamism. This openness to the universality of the mission enriches us

” (General Chapter). It is just as hard over there as it is for us here. It is not always fruitful. Yet the needs are often still more obvious and the “permanent full-time workers” are less numerous. And even supposing they were numerous, a humble and fraternal foreign presence makes good sense, first of all at Assumption, but quite as much in a particular church, even if this presence is not desired there. But how demanding it is!

Indispensable Formation

The Church does not know what to do with a caste of self-satisfied and pretentious intellectuals who are strangers to the living conditions of their populations! Nor can we limit ourselves any more to the ecclesiastical sciences, in spite of the competence needed for teaching.

At the same time there is need of men who are well enough educated to be informed pedagogues, to confront faith and life, to evaluate the stakes and the risks. There is need of priests who humbly place their competence at the service of their people, their evangelization, their betterment. There is need of men impassioned not by titles but by the Kingdom of God. The demands are the same for the foreigner as for the native. The evangelization of tomorrow depends on today's formation, without forgetting the pastoral formation which is too often neglected at Assumption. In spite of real efforts, are we sufficiently concerned with that formation?

Collaborating in our Proper Place

Even if we are the founders of the diocese, we must respect its authorities; we must not supplant the diocesan priests; we must collaborate with them. But we must take care now to give more attention to tasks in closer conformity with our charism or ways of acting more consistent with our spirit. How can we manifest little by little our great apostolic concerns, our own sensibility, the three hallmarks of our apostolate—the doctrinal, the social, and the ecumenical?

Emphasizing Development

In a dilapidated economy, living conditions are more and more precarious, and the simple maintenance of the cement buildings built in earlier times is out of reach. External dependence, therefore, tends to increase and with it the growing danger of stagnation. Only an increased effort to self-finance in spite of all difficulties, and some micro-programs of development in which the population participates can lessen discouragement and human and moral degradation.

Without taking the place of civic authorities and of faltering official organizations, we must provide increasing support in spite of the nonchalance of the people, their habits, their passivity, and their limited sense of the common good. This can be achieved through the development of simple but well-adapted organizations. Thus, working in parallel fashion makes up in part for the inactive or paralyzed public institution.

Working Together so We Can Have a Greater Impact

Until now we have sought with the help of the “PROCURES” and the Provinces—and let us not forget the solidarity fund—to meet our needs, to come to the help of the population, to construct the indispensable infrastructure. We were relying essentially on our own resources. We had gotten into the habit of doing as much as possible by ourselves, and we sometimes showed some mistrust of development agencies which we quickly judged and classified.

It is obvious that in very deteriorated situations where the State is inconsistent, an additional step is now indispensable. Competent organizations are ready to cooperate with us; considerable sums of money are available for well-planned programs. Our solidarity with the people prevents us from neglecting these possibilities, these sources of income, these competences that we ourselves do not have. Development can benefit greatly from this.

We must, however, put our heads together, we the administrators of dioceses and of the congregations, in order to synchronize our requests and formulate a global project in harmony with the concerned agency. This will deprive us a little of our independence but in return the programs will not develop in an anarchical fashion without an overall plan. Efficacy must depend on concerted effort and collaboration, and first of all among the various branches of the great family of Assumption. Our chances of success are multiplied when we present far-reaching plans to several organizations. This practice is necessary today. May the timid inter-Assumption efforts succeed and multiply!

The individuals and organizations that collaborate in the mission without borders are too numerous to be mentioned in a letter like this. So let no one feel slighted! However, I want to explicitly mention our benefactors, small as well as great, aware as I am of all we owe them, and the various Assumptionist Provinces that have generously contributed to the apostolic fund. This enables us to support foundations and look forward to the future of our formation programs without too much concern. In countries where local resources are very limited, the “missions” are a heavy burden. The generosity of the Provinces has always taken care of justified

expenses.

This letter on the mission without borders differs somewhat from the previous ones. It will be of greater interest to some religious more than to others. Its demands will be unequally felt. Yet, no one can dispense himself from reading and studying it. It should reconcile us with the mission without borders, with its substantiating data, reasons for supporting it, and redouble our missionary awareness. It should enrich our prayer. Let us not forget that prayer is an important contribution to the mission. Is not Saint Therese of the Child Jesus, the little Carmelite, the patroness of the missions along with Saint Francis Xavier?

I bring this letter to a close a few days before the feast of Saints Peter and Paul, the Patron Saints of Rome, witnesses to the faith, apostles of the mission without borders. I entrust to them whom Christ sent out into the whole world this message addressed to all of you.

Rome, June 21, 1995

Father Claude Maréchal

Superior General