



D'Alzon November 21, 2019

Next year 2020 will mark the 175th anniversary of the founding of the Assumptionists. Today we recall the day our founder, Emmanuel d'Alzon, died...November 21, 1880. Let me say a word about him. Born in 1810 to a distinguished family in southern France, his whole life consisted in taking profound, life-shattering risks.

First of all, there were the not inconsequential risks he took by virtue of shunning the aristocratic status of his family and the powerful fortune that he would inherit, a fortune that would easily establish him as a man of noble standing and public influence. I was never more impressed with the extraordinary legacy that d'Alzon turned his back on than I did in 2010 when leading a pilgrimage in his footsteps on the occasion of the bicentennial of his birth. On that pilgrimage we found ourselves one day standing on the terrace of the once stunning chateau of Lavagnac where d'Alzon spent his childhood and where he would return regularly throughout his life....described, by some, as the Versailles of the southern France.

Standing on that terrace, wherever you looked ---- to the north, to the south, the east or the west, whatever your eyes could take in belonged to the d'Alzon estate ----- 3,000 acres (1200 hectares) of luxuriant vineyards, lush orange groves, stately poplars and shady chestnut trees, whole forests actually, teeming with wildlife, and even with a river running through it. All of it belonged to the d'Alzon family and all of it, and much more elsewhere, did d'Alzon stand to inherit one day as the eldest child and only son.

Life at the chateau prepared the brilliant and ambitious young d'Alzon for an illustrious career befitting his blue-blooded ancestry ----- a politician like his father in the House of Representatives, a diplomat like his brother-in-law, Anatole de Puységur, a judge, or even a military leader like one of his other relatives, someone who could restore the erstwhile glory of his beloved France.

But just as he was to sacrifice the genteel and privileged life at Lavagnac, so, too, was he to renounce the almost guaranteed life of prestige and power in French society in one of the careers his family ties would easily occasion.

And this latter decision was even more difficult for the young d'Alzon than would at first meet the eye. His closest friends, those he had met while studying in Paris and envisaging the future of France after the devastation of the French Revolution vigorously discouraged him from entering the priesthood. One of them, in fact his best friend, Luglien de Jouenne d'Esgrigny, wrote to him in 1830

“You, a priest? No! You are not made to be a priest. I can't tell you how much pain such an idea gives me. You have to think about this more, I beg you. Don't jump into things and don't fool yourself. Let me tell you the truth. You would have a thousand times more influence for good by avoiding the priest's robe. I know you. I know what your worth. Believe me, your mission, one that is also beautiful and, above all, one that will get results, is to be an honest man among other men. Your example in the world would be more useful than your example among other priests.” (*Dossier sur la Vie et Vertus*, p. 66).

Yes, this was his best friend and one who would stay so throughout his life.

So, when I say that there was a lot at risk when d'Alzon chose to pursue a religious vocation, I am talking, yes, about the good life he could have had at Lavagnac, and, yes, a position of prestige and power, but also a critical position as an influential lay reformer at the side of like-minded friends and colleagues like d'Esgrigny.

So it was that d'Alzon took the ultimate risk of sacrificing so much his world had to offer and

consecrating his entire life to God.

Listen to what he would say to another good friend, Marie Eugénie, the foundress of the Religious of the Assumption. “We live in a century that makes gods of men and denies the rights of God. Re-establishing these rights is such a worthwhile enterprise that it could fill a lifetime.”

There have been many attempts in the history of the Assumptionists to capture the essence of Fr. d’Alzon’s charism and spirituality. I would like to share with you what has helped me best understand Fr. d’Alzon, what it is that made him tick, what made him get up every day, what gave meaning and direction to his life.

Shortly after he was ordained, writing to another of his best friends, Alphonse de Vigniamont, right after d’Alzon was ordained in 1835, he writes, “Dear friend, the most intimate thought of my soul is that the world needs to be penetrated through and through by a Christian idea; otherwise it will fall apart. And the world will not receive this idea but from individuals who will be taken up with it above all else in order to proclaim it in every form it might assume. Some would say the world is evil. It is true that passion turns it away from what is good. But I believe most of all that the world is ignorant. Therefore, we need to teach it and do so in words it can understand” (March 18, 1835).

Penetrating the world with a Christian idea --- proclaiming it in every form it might assume and by individuals who would be taken up with it above all else ---- this is, I believe, the driving force behind Fr. d’Alzon, the man and his vision, not to mention the driving force behind his decision to found us, his sons, the Assumptionists.

As a congregation, as a parish, he calls us to follow in his footsteps.

By Fr. John Franck, A.A.