The year 2010 marks the bicentennial of the birth of Father Emmanuel d'Alzon, founder of the Augustinians of the Assumption, who sponsor Assumption College.

In order to commemorate this anniversary, Assumption College recently sponsored a pilgrimage to the various sites associated with the life and work of Father d'Alzon. Walking "In the Footsteps of d'Alzon," the 24 pilgrims, including alumni, trustees, students, former faculty and friends of the College, made their way to Paris, Nimes and Rome, not as tourists, but as pilgrims with hearts open to discovering who this man was who inspired so many men and women in his day, and continues to do so, through the apostolates sponsored by the Assumptionists throughout the world and the extended Assumptionist family.

From a personal perspective, as president of Assumption College, it was my hope to gain some insight into the world that spawned the vision of Father d'Alzon, that gives life to the educational mission of Assumption.

While many in the United States may not be familiar with Father d'Alzon, it was clear that in France the opposite was true. The importance and stature of Father d'Alzon became quickly apparent not only as we visited those places that were associated with his life, but also by the number of busts of him throughout the city, the streets named after him, and the commemorative plaques on buildings or in churches associated with an aspect of his life.

Father d'Alzon lived in post-Revolutionary France. His vocation emerged in the midst of a society that had embraced secularism and where the influence of religion had been marginalized. This was especially the case in education, which had been completely taken over by the state. Responding to this situation, d'Alzon came to the realization that it was imperative to permeate society with a Christian idea if individuals, and in turn society, were to be transformed. Education would be the avenue to accomplish this transformation.

As we visited d'Alzon's place of birth and his family home and estate in Lavagnac, we were struck by the wealth and social stature of the family. He came from nobility, his family being among the wealthiest in southern France. Given the status of his family, d'Alzon had a bright future. He was positioned to wield influence in society and was introduced to the politics of his day when his father was elected to the Chamber of Deputies, requiring that the family move to Paris. We visited the Sorbonne, where d'Alzon studied law.

During these years he began to see how the Church was constantly under siege and how religion itself was under attack. As we visited the various churches where d'Alzon attended daily Mass or spent time in prayer, such as St. Marie de la Victoire, whose altar has an engraving of him, the deeply spiritual side of the man began to reveal itself. It was easy to comprehend how he gradually began to realize that the avenue by which he would influence society would be the priesthood. His commitment to the Church, his desire to defend religion, compelled him to follow his vocation, which led to his decision to leave his family chateau one evening without informing them that he was going to Montpellier where he would begin his seminary studies. He left behind his wealth and a future that could have brought him into influential circles because of his love for the Church and his desire to combat the secularism that had permeated France. He was a man of deeply held convictions. What is ironic is that his decision to become a priest did not diminish the influence that he would have on society.

The image of Father d'Alzon that emerged through this pilgrimage was that of a man of great enthusiasm and energy. We heard stories of how he would rush into a church or the Cathedral of Nimes at 5 a.m. to celebrate Mass. He was a man on fire with the Gospel. Evangelization was a key component of his ministry, which took on many forms. It was not uncommon for him to deliver several sermons a day at different churches or to give a mission, where he attracted large crowds of people. He used the medium of publications with the founding of a publishing house, which exists to this day as Bayard Press, to counter the anti-religious forces of the day. Two publications that continue to be published today, the weekly magazine, Le Pelerin, and a daily newspaper, La Croix, were endeavors endorsed by Father d'Alzon. The founding of schools was Father d'Alzon's principal focus as he saw these institutions as the best way to re-introduce a Christian vision of the world into his society.

As we visited the various Assumptionist institutions in Paris, Nimes, and Rome, we saw not only the living legacy of Father d'Alzon, but also the image of a man who was not deterred by the challenges he faced. He was a man who leaders both in the Church and in secular society sought out. People wanted to know what he thought, and sought out his advice. The pilgrims of Assumption College came to understand that Father d'Alzon was one of the great spiritual figures of the 19th century, whose vision remains relevant to our own time and place.

By Francesco C. Cesareo
President, Assumption College
Published in The Catholic Free Press

Anyone would appreciate the opportunity to travel to Western Europe's most beautiful cities. The art and architecture, the food and music, the beautiful landscapes, and the poetry of romance languages can be intoxicating for any visitor. But a pilgrimage is more than a sight-seeing trip – it combines travel with spiritual growth. The pilgrimage to Paris, Nimes and Rome recently undertaken by a group from Assumption College was a synthesis of exciting sensory experiences and quiet moments of contemplation.

This pilgrimage commemorated the bicentennial of Father Emmanuel d'Alzon's birth. Father d'Alzon, the founder of the Augustinians of the Assumption, had a passion for education and a profound love for the Church. During his lifetime, France was still reeling from the effects of anti-clericalism that arose during the Revolution, the residue of which was taking its toll on the public's appreciation for its traditional religion. In a society that was distancing itself from its Christian heritage, Emmanuel d'Alzon was an enthusiastic champion of the Church whose life illustrated the depth of Catholic spirituality.

As a member of the landed elite in France, Emmanuel d'Alzon could have pursued a number of different careers. His love for the challenges of education and his outgoing personality could have brought him power and even greater fortune. However, he became a priest (in conflict with the will of his parents) and eventually dedicated his life to building up the Church through the founding of a religious order. His devotion to the Church overcame any desire to seek recognition through commerce or politics. He truly was a humble man whose actions illustrated his selflessness.

An appreciation for the history of Father d'Alzon's life was essential to the spirit of this pilgrimage because it helped each pilgrim better understand his legacy. The companions on this journey learned that the Christian charity of Father d'Alzon lives on in the different groups of men and women who have been inspired by his life story. We visited Assumptionist fathers and met sisters from various congregations, and the generosity and hospitality we experienced were the greatest gifts we received on this pilgrimage. These men and women are living monuments to the spirit of Father d'Alzon; their Christian charity was the perfect complement to a pilgrimage that highlighted the life of this dedicated churchman. We experienced in the modern day the Christian virtues valued by Fr. d'Alzon in the nineteenth century. The interaction with pious Christians abroad reminded us that the traditions of the Church that Father d'Alzon cherished have carried on into the 21st Century.

As we traveled through France and Italy, we became fascinated with a man who was both

externally outgoing and spiritually mature. His story was an ever-present reminder of the greatest goods in the human experience: education, community, and faith. They are gifts that direct us toward the cultivation of virtue and the discovery of truth. And truth is the theme of any pilgrimage. If this brief pilgrimage itself did not uncover some profound spiritual or intellectual truth for the individual pilgrim, it certainly inspired these pilgrims to pursue truth throughout their lives.

Our pilgrimage was a reminder of the most valuable treasures in life. The joys of camaraderie and the exhilarating encounters with the mysteries of faith highlighted the richness of Catholic spirituality. Pilgrimages underscore the experiences that are valued by all devout followers of Christ. One willingly encounters issues of morality, community, faith, and education. This is essential to experiencing the spiritual growth that is so important to a pilgrimage.

Ultimately, it seems that pilgrimage is an integral part of the Christian experience. Community and contemplation – the fundamental components of a spiritual journey – are essential to a healthy faith life. If they are important to the strengthening of faith, then they are important to one's Christian identity. For a small group of individuals from Assumption College, this brief pilgrimage to Paris, Nimes, and Rome was a journey that provided lessons for an entire lifetime. These lessons revealed the power of pilgrimage.

By Max Ebacher
Class of 2010,
Assumption College
Published in The Catholic Free Press