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At about the time the young aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville was traveling horseback around the United States to study the character of the American Revolution, another young French aristocrat was getting ordained to the priesthood. He was Emmanuel d'Alzon, the founder of the Assumptionists. His family had experienced the terrific upheaval that was the French Revolution, and the new priest was to live out the rest of his life dealing with its consequences for the Church.

Something new, something huge, something which was overturning the old order of things in Europe, and which would soon upset the traditional orders of virtually all the peoples of the earth, was emerging. D'Alzon's first instinct in response to this new thing, as he saw it in the revolution in France, was like that of Tocqueville naturally enough, aristocratic. For the both of them, their responses to the revolution were rooted in the reasonable desire to conserve human institutions, not destroy them. But for d'Alzon a greater and deeper response was to predominate: d'Alzon was an aristocrat whose focus was on a France whose political order had been a center of Christendom for a thousand years—it was not merely human institutions he wanted to conserve.

One might describe the outlines of the problem he faced this way: A profoundly apocalyptical tension marks much of what Jesus says and does in the gospels. This tension characterized as well the sensibilities of the early Church living under fierce Roman persecution. The tension slackened, however, when pagan Rome accommodated itself to Christianity. Persecution ceased, emperor worship was banned, Christian worship received state support. The empire had yielded, imperfectly to be sure, but still *decisively,* to the transcendent authority of Christ as the image of God in Man.

This accommodation changed everything. The pagan order was finished; Christendom was born.

What d'Alzon sensed in his Christian aristocratic guts, however, was that the revolution, still unfolding its vast wings before him, meant the decisive termination of just that accommodation. The direct and vicious assaults on the Church in France in the wake of the revolution were not the mere excesses of a more or less benign movement gotten temporarily out of hand; they

were the direct and actual consequence of the theory behind the disorder, they were the unambiguous expression of its intent. They were the face of the Beast unveiled, and that Beast meant business.

How to respond to such a thing? Tocqueville and d'Alzon both, like good aristocrats, aimed to face up to these events reasonably, or one might say, conservatively. The strength of the aristocratic cast of mind is its balance, its stability and moderation. In the face of the wild radicalism of the French Revolution, a moderate and measured response would at first seem clearly best. Temperamentally, such moderation came less easily to d'Alzon, I think, than to Tocqueville…but not only temperamentally, given d'Alzon's intense focus on the *theological* implications of the revolution.

Tocqueville called himself a "friend of democracy," but in his concern for what he called "the greatness and the happiness of man," he saw a threat posed by a wholly new kind of despotism which the offspring of revolution, Americans for instance, might have to fear. But as d'Alzon would see it, it was nothing less than the image of God in Man that was under mortal threat. The salvation of souls and the life of the Kingdom of God raise the stakes considerably beyond the already high stakes of revolution regarded more narrowly as a political event. D'Alzon's theological viewpoint opened his mind and his sensibility more readily to the transcendent—and therefore more than merely human--greatness of man, as well as to the more malevolent depths of original sin and the miseries it provokes.

Moreover, d'Alzon had read Plato, he had studied Augustine thoroughly; he knew then that the political order expresses the order of men's souls. "The city is the soul writ large," says Plato in his Republic, and for Augustine, likewise, in his City of God, the political order is determined by what its members love, that is, by what is the desire of their hearts and souls. The order of Christendom represented the order of a soul open in some degree to the revelation of God in Man, open to the transcendent greatness of a humanity in which the Creator God, in history, in the midst of His Chosen People, incarnates Himself in Christ, so that the soul of man becomes nothing less than a living mirror of the Trinitarian life of God. The great Trinitarian and Christological expressions of early Christian thought implied a stunning transformation of the classical vision of the human soul. They brought about a radical deepening and elevation of that former vision, raising man beyond the confines of nature into the luminous boundaries of grace and the Kingdom of God.

What order of soul then was represented by the new political thing, bursting in on Europe in the form of disorder, revolt and revolution, and sweeping away the divine grandeur of the Christian world?

The kind of thinking that shaped the revolution meant explicitly to debunk the order of the soul expressed in Christendom, but it did so cleverly, appealing to a standard that Christians themselves would find hard to reject. The revolution attacked the Church and defended itself, all in the name of "reason," "enlightenment" and a new reasonable "order of the ages." And it made every effort to assert such a supposed enlightened order *effectively*, that is, by way of the universities. A new political order demanded a new order of soul which would be achieved through a new kind of education.

But unlike many of his contemporaries, and many, many more of those who would come after them, d'Alzon would not be taken in.

Enlightenment reason is purely instrumental; its explicit aim is the acquisition of power over nature and over the unruliness of men. The natural and social sciences, then coming to the fore, geared their methods precisely towards physical observation, quantitative description, experimental prediction, and ultimately to the power that grants *control*. For the thinkers of the revolution, the only limits set to human power are the limits of timidity and ignorance, and those limits are to be overcome. That is, a purely instrumental science or reason is the direct correlative of an entirely unbounded human will to power.

The ancient term used to describe such unbounded will--the will that asserts its unwillingness to serve anything as greater than itself—is "satanic." Early on, d'Alzon sniffed the sulfurous odor that accompanied the events taking place around him.

Reason as d'Alzon and the tradition understood it most deeply, is the human capacity to share in the Word, or Logos, of the God who speaks His heart to us. It is precisely such a reason as points out the way, the truth and the life for man. The "reason" of the revolutionaries, by contrast, binding itself instrumentally to the unguided and unrestrained will of man, becomes therefore most perfect Unreason. The attempts of the revolution and of its institutions of education to break radically with all that went before, their devotion to "progress" understood precisely as the breaking with the wisdom of the tradition, these things d'Alzon recognized for the unreason and disorder that in fact they are. His response to them was to seek out a form of education which would, in the face of the revolt, defend and clarify the image of God in man.

One might say that his response to the radical heart of the revolution was aristocratic and

moderate: it sought to preserve the ancient wisdom and standards; it sought to build, not to destroy. But one always senses in d'Alzon a more radical passion as well, an apocalyptical fire that burns in his soul.

The kind of education it took to raise the classical world of antiquity to the heights of Christian wisdom addressed men who typically respected limits and abhorred *hybris* and over-reaching. Reason as the ancients generally understood it had disclosed to them both the nobility of man and the boundaries posed to him by nature and mortality. The reason of classical philosophy was therefore ultimately open to instruction from above, and came at last to assent to that instruction, just as Rome's emperors came at last to bow to the authority of Christ. But the Enlightenment thinkers asserted a form of reason which was from the beginning intentionally and methodologically
closed
to that higher instruction, explicitly and methodologically
bent
to serve a will to power which it was powerless to guide.

The kind of education d'Alzon sought, therefore, cannot not be merely conservative and moderate. It cannot be founded merely on a return to the forms and practices of the university as it stood in Christendom.

Not surprisingly, then, the education d'Alzon sought is still at best a work in progress. But incomplete as that work may yet be, and difficult as it surely is, it remains the single-most important and definitive mission of the Assumptionists. Their task is to continue the work begun by Fr. d'Alzon, to practice a form of education which defends the image of God in Man and which cultivates the soul after the pattern of the City of God, but this in the full awareness that the secular order and the contemporary university do not wish to accommodate themselves to Christian wisdom. On the contrary, the social sciences, which most typically constitute and direct the contemporary university, are habitually and methodologically opposed to precisely such efforts. An Assumptionist education cannot but be difficult in attainment and difficult in practice, far-sighted, familiar with the old and the new, rejecting the consolations of easy and false piety, demanding the tough-minded investigation and presentation of many things long banished from the modern household of the mind. It cannot but be radical in orientation, fiery in its substance, and in some ways necessarily also inflammatory in its effects.

When d'Alzon took "Thy Kingdom Come" as the motto of the Assumptionists, he meant business!

By Fr. Barry Bercier