INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The work of the General Chapter

We have already drafted and published a report on the state of the Congregation, as well as the report of General government for the members of the Chapter. You could wonder, does the Superior General still have something to say? I would like to profit from this important moment, the beginning of the 32nd General Chapter of the Congregation, to communicate to you one last time some concrete and specific suggestions for our life and our mission, which I think should be considered seriously by the Chapter. These suggestions touch upon ten different areas, but I will try to be concise.

A religious sister recently asked me what would be the major topics on the agenda for the upcoming Chapter. I told her there were three:

1) a review of our life as Assumptionists;
2) a reflection on our mission in the light of today's needs and our current capabilities;
3) finally, an effort to adjust the organization of the Congregation to assure as much as possible the future vitality of our communities and of our apostolates. With the active participation of lay Assumptionists, the Chapter will do all it can to encourage the Lay/Religious alliance, established at the Chapter of 2005.

And we will do all of that in fidelity to Father d'Alzon... The Bicentennial celebration of d'Alzon's birth reminded me once again of the extraordinary zeal of our founder and how seriously he took his life as a disciple and apostle and consequently his life as a religious.

It is clear to me that the two most important questions we will deal with at the Chapter are the first two I've mentioned above: a review of the quality of our life as Assumptionsits and a reflection on our mission today. I've already written about both of these things in my report to the Congregation in view of the Chapter. It is in these two areas that I hope to be able to say that I had the most impact during my years in office.

1) The **review of our life as Assumptionists** is not easy, but the need to make such a review strikes me as pressing. Young people are attracted to our way of life if they see that it is distinctive, that it represents a real option for them. Our life must be seen as a life oriented entirely by faith, a life centered on a deep relationship with Jesus Christ, a life shared at a deep level with others in community. If natural considerations rather than
faith
seem to dominate our personal and common decisions, then the life has lost its salt. If common
prayer
is formal and not cared for, and if we do not invest seriously in personal prayer, then Jesus Christ is not at the heart of our life. If
relations in community
are superficial, then why live and work together? Is
our work
truly an apostolate if the faith dimension, our attachment to Jesus Christ and our fraternal bonds are weak or secondary? If I ask these questions, it is because I know these problems exist among some religious and some communities in the Congregation, and I have said it to you when I have detected these problems in your Provinces. It is my hope that the Chapter, especially by its reflection on our life as “men of faith” will provide vigorous reminders and aids to our brothers in this area.

My recommendations in this regard are hardly original. It is not up to the General Chapter to take decisions on these matters since the Rule of Life already deals with the question. But a General Chapter could reaffirm with insistence the importance of certain practices without which the fraternal life ends up being more of a pious wish than a lived reality. Fraternal life in the Assumption should be characterized by:

- *Common prayer*, at least twice daily, celebrated with care and beauty, whether a community has a wealth of means at its disposal or simply meager resources.
- Time set aside each day for *personal prayer*.
- Each day, at least *one meal in common*, at which each member of the community can be present.
- *Weekly community meetings*, not during a meal, meetings that should be spiritually and intellectually nourishing and not a burden.
- *Fraternal relations* that are transparent, honest, supportive.
- An ever greater openness to the Lay/Religious alliance and an insertion into the local setting (neighborhood, Church...) that is expressed on a daily basis by *hospitality* in the community.

2) I think the reflection on **our mission** will be easier, but no less important. D’Alzon was a man

of faith and a man of action. During his entire life he sought to transform a Church and society that he considered seriously disoriented and dispirited.

The more I study religion, the more I discover, in the depths of Catholic teaching, such a great wealth, a strain of thought so rich, a life so powerful that, on the one hand, I do not see how a priest who wants to renew society can find a better way than the truth itself and, on the other hand, I think the only way to strengthen flagging spirits or heal the moral fatigue that everyone laments today, is to expose society to the brilliant light that guides all people coming into this world, to warm them all with the rays of the eternal Word. (Letter to Alphonse de Vigniamont, 18 March 1835)

On the basis of reflection and analysis, he discerned what he considered to be the deepest needs of his time. It is these insights together with his love for God's plan for mankind that fired up d'Alzon's imagination and energies and made it possible for him to launch a tremendous diversity of works (and I might add with just a very small number of collaborators and diminishing inherited funds) to meet these needs. He had the flexibility and disinterestedness to discard projects when they were no longer useful or pass them on to others when they could more ably pursue the work.

In this regard, although throughout the entire Assumptionist world I have discovered apostolic projects (even modest ones) remarkable for their relevance, creativity and vitality, I have also discovered too many brothers, to use d'Alzon's words, whose "flagging spirits" or "moral fatigue" need to be healed. In my report to the Chapter, I speak of a lack of apostolic creativity, of a tendency to get installed in an apostolic project and to allow oneself to be carried by the routine of a Mass to be said, a baptism to be celebrated, an instruction to be provided...and to refuse to be given a new assignment by a Provincial whose desire is to reinvigorate the life of a confrère or a community. It is my hope that enlightened by your presentation at the Chapter of "projects that mobilize" our discussions will help to provoke throughout the Congregation greater daring, generosity and disinterestedness in our mission for the Kingdom.

Let me say what I think is most necessary if we are to renew the mission at the Assumption.

- First, we have to see our work as mission and not just as work that keeps us busy. To see our work as mission, we have to do it with the conviction that God has asked us to do this work and that our work is a great cause, that it is trying to respond to the ways in which "man is threatened as the image of God". Those two things (a sense of mission and a conviction of the

worthiness of our cause) will help keep at bay the kind of “ennui” that I’ve witnessed at times, as well as the human problems that “ennui” provokes.

- Second, we have to be both modest and daring in our mission. We should be inventive and prophetic (see Letter #11) by elaborating simple (or complex if we are capable) educational ventures, by elaborating social service projects among the poor, by inventing evangelizing efforts to reach young people or other “unattainable” populations... Notice I haven’t mentioned parishes; it’s not because they cannot be genuinely missionary or be congenial to the common life, but because often enough I have seen parishes where brothers fall into a pastoral routine, adopt a very individualistic approach to ministry, and frequently lose their apostolic imagination. Where we continue to invest in parochial ministry, and I believe that this is called for in certain circumstances, then we have work to do, and the publication “Assumptionists in Parishes” should be a valuable aid in this regard.

3) The third topic on the agenda of the Chapter is the question of **community organization.**

I believe that the Congregation is at a major turning-point in its history; as important I think as that moment in 1923 when the Congregation was reorganized into Provinces, at the request of the Congregation for Religious. At this time, we are led to reconsider the question for various reasons, but most especially because we have become very much aware of the rapid transformation that has occurred in the Congregation over the last twenty years. We recognize the ways in which we are rich, but we also recognize our poverty. What is the real potential of each of the Provinces,

- the potential for constituting viable communities,
- the potential for finding leaders for our communities, as well as for our works,
- the potential in the area of vocation ministry,
- the potential for accompanying young people in formation,
- the potential for meeting our material needs, for daily living but also for apostolic projects,
-the potential for initiating new projects to meet new needs?

We need a community organization that takes into account our strengths as well as our weaknesses. I would say even more: an organization that has at its primary preoccupation not the strengthening of the already strong, but the accompaniment of those seeking greater vitality but who can succeed at that only by being part of a genuine community of communities. Please allow me to develop this point at greater length.

For a while now, we have been talking of a sense of belonging to the Assumption world-wide (and not simply to one Province). We have made a good deal of progress in terms of solidarity and interprovincial collaboration, and we've begun speaking of the "body of the Assumption." In fact, we have moved along these lines in various areas:

- solidarity in financial terms;
-apostolic projects being pursued in common by two or three Provinces;
-international communities that are becoming more numerous;
-foundations that would have been impossible without interprovincial collaboration (Riobamba, Sokodé, El Puche, Manila, Nîmes, and others);
-finally, at the Council of Congregation, financial planning that is becoming more and more rigorous, demanding and shared.

To my mind, in the world and in the Church in which we live, this is the direction in which we must continue to move. It represents a vision of the mission that I do not hesitate to call prophetic, and will enable us...

...to launch **ambitious missions** in the future, for we are too poor alone to think big, and certainly too poor alone to realize ambitious projects; ...to draw close to those **areas of the Congregation that feel isolated or vulnerable** (because lacking in numbers or material resources), for they are not only in need of financial aid, but also in need of the encouragement that comes from feeling that they are in contact with the broader reality of the Assumption;

...to encourage **young people** who are discerning their own vocation and who rejoice over the fact that the Assumption is a global reality, that there is in the Congregation a variety of missions to which they might be assigned and that they are not limited to the few that are currently sponsored by "their" Province;

...to accompany and to form **Provinces that have less experience with Assumptionist life**, for through ongoing contact with the broader Assumptionist world, they learn how to be an Assumptionist, they come to understand that there are different ways of being an Assumptionist and that other areas of the Congregation can teach them something about the life or about ways of doing mission.

Yes, I am convinced that it is time to take a major step forward, to reinforce what I would call a logic of communion... -a logic that... -insists especially on interdependence and communion -encourages generosity and solidarity, but according to criteria that together we establish and not simply criteria that each Province decides on its own -pushes us to be more open to points of view that come from elsewhere and that help us to see more clearly our own reality, to see what we do not see because we have no distance on ourselves.

To make a decisive move in the direction of this logic, some geographic reorganization will be helpful, but alone it would be inadequate. Allow me to explain.

The importance of local and regional vitality

I am convinced that we must do everything we can to insure that the Assumption is strong locally and regionally. The mission takes flesh in a particular Church, among a particular people. And those who live and work at that level play a unique role in identifying needs and inventing creative responses to meet those needs. In other words, the Assumption's missionary vitality will manifest itself through initiative and creativity at the local and regional level. A more rational geographic organization of the Congregation would enable us to simplify our governmental structures, and it is to be hoped that it would help to energize the mission at the local and regional level.

The vitality of the entire Congregation

But to foster the overall vitality and creativity of the Congregation, geographic reorganization needs to be accompanied by changes at the international level as well. I believe that it is even more urgent to organize ourselves in a way that makes possible greater solidarity, more collaboration, and deeper communion at this international level. We should organize the Congregation in a way that helps and sustains each region and at the same time the Congregation as a whole. And all of that with one goal in mind: to make every part of our religious family, even and perhaps especially the weakest and most isolated, as dynamic as possible and open to the future. We ought to think of the Congregation as a "community of geographic entities" and imagine a type of government that could concretize and structure this vision and that could help us act and decide on the basis of this vision in a systematic, organized and ongoing fashion.

To speak very concretely, I think we should move in the direction that has been proposed of creating **a governing body for the entire Congregation** (which has been called a Plenary General Council or CGP) that can make decisions for the entire Congregation, decisions that have a real impact on the life and mission of the Congregation at the local and regional level.

Creating this kind of governing body would reflect this logic of communion: its primary focus would be on the health of the entire body and not primarily on the health of the individual parts. Important decisions regarding the life and mission of the entire body would be taken by a body whose preoccupation is the health and well-being of the entire body.

-I have called this a logic of communion and of real inter- dependence, rather than what currently exists, a logic of independence and dependency -It is also a logic of communion in the sense that the first concern is not to create a structure that seeks above all to be attentive to the poor in such a way that they can be sustained by the body.

As some Provinces have suggested, in any community reorganization, we should foresee means to insure that we are respecting the particular competence of those at the local and regional levels (e.g. by taking decisions at the international level only on proposals developed and presented by the local and regional levels, by making necessary consultations, etc.), but we also need to insure that a new governing body at the international level has some real impact on the life and mission of the Congregation (unlike the current Council of Congregation).

These then are three areas in which we will be working during this Chapter. But permit me to make other very concrete suggestions on other precise topics, which likewise seem important and on which I believe the Chapter should pronounce itself.

4) The Lay-Religious Alliance – In my visits around the world, I have been impressed by the great number of lay people who are close to the Assumption, as well as the very diverse ways in which this “closeness” is lived. I think it’s less urgent to define degrees of “closeness” (and not at all desirable to favor some rather than others), than it is to help each other deepen our Assumptionist identity. There is one specific proposal that I hope this Chapter, with our lay brothers and sisters present, will act on:

This is the elaboration of a common Rule of Life for all lay people in the world who want to draw closer to the spirituality and mission of the Assumption. While Assumption lay people are very diverse, I apply to the lay people the same logic that had been successfully applied to the religious (who are also known to be very diverse): one Rule of Life (and one *Ratio Institutionis*) for everyone, applied in diverse concrete ways according to specific cultures and needs. Only with a common Rule of Life can we deepen our understanding and living out of the Assumption charism and foster the kind of unity that we need for the vitality of the Congregation.

There are other items on the agenda regarding the Lay-Religious Alliance, but I would like to add yet another. I suggest that in the context of the Alliance we find ways to reach out even more to young people. Many young people are attracted to the Volunteer Program, but many are also looking for a spiritual teaching and a community, without necessarily wanted to commit themselves in any long-term way. Have we been sufficiently attentive to this group of lay people?

5) Asia – During this Chapter, I believe that some very concrete steps must be taken toward a greater autonomy and unity for our communities in Asia. Not everyone agrees with this. We may think them unready for greater autonomy and unity, and I am inclined to agree with that assessment. However, rather than see our communities depending on two different Provinces for support (in terms of animation, formation, resources), I think their growth would be better served already now if their animation is unified and their overall support is provided directly by the new CGP, which could foresee the personnel and funds needed for their further development.

6) Near East Mission – The Mission is modest, but that did not stop Emmanuel d'Alzon from having big dreams and ambitions. We should continue the effort to revitalize our mission in the Near East by...

- continuing to support the re-foundation in Bucharest continuing to encourage those religious who think, live, work and worship in the Oriental tradition. Currently, in Romania, in Bulgaria, and in Greece, the authorities in the Orthodox Church are hardly making efforts to draw closer to the Catholic Church, and the Uniate Catholic Church in those countries is hardly an effective ecumenical tool. But I believe that the Assumption must continue to do its part to nurture the theological, spiritual, and liturgical tradition of the East. I am not able to say how that should be done or if we must continue to do it in both Blaj and Plovdiv, but I am saying we have to give this some serious thought and take whatever decisions will help us reach this objective, which I consider to be important and which the Assumption is equipped to make a useful contribution.
- and (if we are serious about wanting to stay in Istanbul) by the preparing one or another

religious in the area of Islamic studies.

7) Justice and Peace –We have not committed ourselves to any Congregation-wide projects or orientations in this area, but many Provinces have succeeded in launching very concrete projects that seek to address the needs of the poor or oppressed. At the level of the Congregation, we need to bring to term a project that was launched by the Council of Congregation some years back, namely,

- to pursue our reflection on these questions and publish the results of our reflections on d'Alzon's and Augustine's approach to social questions and on what may be characteristic of an Assumptionist approach to these questions.

More concretely, the General Chapter might also make a recommendation to every Province, namely,

- whenever a Province/Region is able to envision a new foundation, it should do everything possible to implement a project that directly focuses on the needs of the materially poor.

8) Education & Communication – The Assumption is seriously committed to work in both of these areas. I believe

- we should increase the number of Assumptionist religious and lay people actually teaching in Assumptionist institutions. Their involvement should not be limited to "pastoral" care or administrative duties, but should focus principally on classroom teaching and not just in the areas of theology and philosophy.

- we should pursue our reflection on the properly Assumptionist character that we want to give to our work in the areas of education and communication. The booklet, "Teaching and Education in the Spirit of the Assumption," can help us in this work. We can hope that an international Educational Congress, already proposed by us with the Oblate sisters, will eventually be held.

- we should intensify our efforts to help religious and lay Assumptionists working in the area of media to meet at an international level, in view of continuing formation, but also in order to imagine greater collaboration. This is a mission in which one Province has an enormous amount of experience and another is preparing a substantial number of young religious to work and teach. Greater collaboration could help maintain the dynamism of this important dimension of the Assumptionist mission.

9) Postulation – In the past, a great deal of good work was done in this area, but it has suffered greatly from a lack of continuity. The study of Fr. d'Alzon's life and writings led to the declaration of the heroicity of his virtues. We have begun the study of many dossiers regarding possible healings due to Fr. d'Alzon's intercession, but we never carried this kind of study to completion. I think that is regrettable. In the past few years, we have made efforts to remedy this situation. I strongly recommend that the Chapter firmly back this effort so that continuity can be assured. D'Alzon is a saint for our times, and that good news should be shared with many. At the same time, we should not forget the other causes that have been introduced, those of Fr. Étienne Pernet, Fr. François Picard, and Fr. Marie-Clément Staub, and the cause of canonization of our three blessed Bulgarian martyrs. All of these are entrusted to the care of the Postulator.

10) Finances – We have done some fine work at the last two Councils of Congregation, particularly in terms of giving more concrete form to the solidarity that we have practiced now for many years. While financial resources are at the service of the mission and should not become our central focus, it is clear that they are a very concrete reflection of our apostolic priorities and can be a clear expression of our inter-dependence. Responsible management of our resources, but responsible management carried out collegially is the direction in which we must move even more vigorously in the years ahead.

Financial management has hardly been an easy task in the past three years. The silver lining to that cloud, however, has been to reinforce our conviction of the need to manage our resources very carefully and with good foresight. That being said, even if there are some things that we could have done better in general government during this period, the General Treasurer's report makes it clear that the Congregation's resources have been managed carefully and responsibly.

By way of conclusion

Teaching and governing are two very different things; I learned that a long time ago. Governing is in good part the art of inventing and implementing the concrete means for living those ideals that define us as a community, and that process is time-consuming and entails compromise. I've suggested here some concrete ways of living out our ideals. They are suggestions that may not be acceptable to all or easy to implement. My only concern has been to communicate my own deeply held convictions, whether or not these are popular or practical. At times leadership requires that as well. My prayer now is that we be more attentive to the Spirit than to our own very limited calculations. We can be confident if we do whatever He inspires us to do.

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