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Emmanuel d'Alzon founder of the Augustinians of the Assumption and Oblates of the Assumption

“Thy Kingdom Come” collection

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Emmanuel d'Alzon, passionate for the Kingdom of God

When God sees his people in need, he calls people to respond. He gives them the grace of compassion and love like His own; and the strength to respond. He calls them and he sends them.

In the Church of the XIX century, Emmanuel d'Alzon, the founder of the Augustinians of the Assumption – the Assumptionists – and the Oblates of the Assumption, was one of these men. Sensitive, by nature and by grace, to the great changes of his country and the world after the French Revolution, he suffered wherever God was threatened in man and man was threatened as image of God.

His passion for the coming of God's Kingdom, his passion for Jesus Christ and for everything that Jesus Christ

loves, urged him to share them first with the Laity, before sharing them with his brother and sister Assumptionists. Emmanuel d'Alzon made them aware of the great causes of God and the people of their time. He urged them to adopt new and daring paths: a mission in the Orient, journalism, pilgrimages, seminaries for the poor, etc.

But before all else, he invited them in one and the same movement to the reign of Jesus Christ in them and around them” .

After the death of their founder, the Assumption seeks to continue his work, out of love of Christ and for the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Father Hervé Stéphan, Assumptionist,

Superior General 1975-1987

Father Emmanuel d'Alzon

What do you know of Father Emmanuel d'Alzon? If you live in Nîmes or in the area, you may have

heard someone mention his name at one time or another. This man of the XIX century (1810-1880), merits more than the mere mention in a history book and his congregation, the Augustinians of the Assumption, founded in 1845 in Nîmes, more that the traditional stroke of the pen of Daniel Rops, following the confrontations that poisoned the Dreyfus affair at the end of the XIX and beginning of the XX century. Besides, by that time Father d'Alzon had been dead for twenty years.

A son of the Cévennes, of southern of origin in appearance as well as spirit, if a man of the Church can be defined e geographically and psychologically, he was Vicar General of his diocese for forty years, and he founded two religious families: the Augustinians of the Assumption, normally called Assumptionists (1850), and the Oblates of the Assumption (1865). He played a significant role in the birth of the Religious of the Assumption (1839). Throughout his life, Emmanuel d'Alzon overflowed with activity, initiatives and projects and never hesitated to lead from the front. He found his strength in the long hours he spent in prayer.

So let us turn now to the time of his birth to gain a better understanding of his life and his journey to the Assumption.

The advantage of a golden youth

Emmanuel d'Alzon was born into an aristocratic family, through his father Henri, the Daudé d'Alzon, recent nobility of Viganaise origin almost ruined by the Revolution. In the XVII century, the eldest branch decided to leave the severity of the Cevennes for the vast sunny plains of the Languedoc. Through his mother (Faventine de Montredon), Emmanuel d'Alzon

belonged to a famous bourgeois family enriched by offices and of recent nobility whom the Revolution pursued with vengeful hatred. When Emmanuel was born, August 30, 1810, in the ancestral house at Condamine in Vigan, France had entered the last beautiful days of the empire before the twilight of the disasters of the war with Spain and the defeat of Russia.

There were many stories to tell the family in the evening about the major and minor events that embossed more than twenty-five years of political upheaval. At Vigan, one remembered the visit

of a black cardinal, Giulio Gabrielli, separated from the papal court, itself a prisoner at Fontainebleau, who had benefited from the hospitality of the d'Alzons and predicted, in a blessing, the destiny of this family's child.

The château at Lavagnac In 1816, the château at Lavagnac (near Montague in the Hérault) purchased in 1790 by the Faventines, heirs of the Conti princes, now totally restored, provided a home for the d'Alzons that was less austere than Vigan. In close proximity to the Hérault, an excellent region for swimming in the warm waters of summer. The large agricultural area linked to the château allowed them to live off

the rents and tenant farmers without any worries about tomorrow, and maintain their place at the heart of the beautiful Languedocian society. Viscount Henri d'Alzon, tempted by demon politics, had himself elected by a hand vote under official scrutiny on several occasions.

Opportunities and Duties It could be deduced from all this that Emmanuel d'Alzon only experienced the delights of Capoue during his childhood. It is true that he had the fortune of access to the cultural riches of the elite and a good education; he also benefited from the advantages of his birth: affluence, relationships, and emancipation from an all consuming manual labour. But this would too easily ignore his concrete environment and the responsibilities linked with it as well as his own conception of a chivalrous sense of honour and Christian responsibility.

When Providence places someone at the summit of a social elite, it is not for their egoistical benefit to gain an advantageous position, but to teach them, during their life, to come to the assistance of those who need help on their journey. A united family

One is always a child of one's family. This was very true for Emmanuel. His milieu provided him with a psychological and emotional equilibrium. The ties uniting him to his parents and his two sisters, Augustine et Marie, remained very deep and beneficial.

Through his sister, Marie, married to the Count of Puységur, Emmanuel experienced the joys of a prolonged family life continued through their descendents. Three nephews and nieces provided his frequent visits to Lavagnac with a refreshing air and tone much needed amidst his continual problems and obligations.

Formation among the elite

As the Viscount d'Alzon was forced to live in Paris in his role as deputy from 1817, it was decided that the whole family would move there for the school year in 1823. Thus it was that Emmanuel for the first time left his much loved Midi. This departure was to be the prelude to a number of voyages in his life. His parents chose for him the best scholastic establishments in the capital, the first a public school. According to the terminology of the time (Saint Louis College, on the boulevard Saint-Michel), the second, private - (Stanislas College, in the district of Notre-Dame des Champs). Public at that epoch did not signify lay, and private did not mean adherence to any particular confession.

After a short period of adaptation

to the city and new routine), Emmanuel enthusiastically pursued, an intellectual and spiritual formation given in these colleges, preferring this open, stimulating, and communal milieu to that of tutoring, which was more «stifling» being strictly familial and individual. He was inspired by this experience when he later found himself in charge of an important school at Nîmes, the College of the Assumption in 1844. He never ceased to advise parents to offer their children the open and social educational milieu offered by the colleges in their collective type of education rather than all the old forms formerly employed by the wealthy. The scholastic system was still just for the privileged,

In the XIX century, education especially in secondary education. Primary education was improving, thanks particularly to the growth of religious congregations on men and women and certain forms of socialist campaigns. The urban bourgeoisie, although traditionally anti-clerical, never hesitated to entrust their sons to these religious institutions “of the good Fathers” (notably the Jesuits) and their daughters to the convents, out of a desire for them to learn “good manners” rather than for the sciences. The French State was more concerned with teaching than education, and encouraged the communes to open primary schools (Guizot Law, 1833), and colleges for boys in the cities and the large market towns that served as the breeding ground for future public functionaries and liberal professions, while willingly abandoning the many regional Church establishments: minor seminaries, private colleges, institutions and boarding schools of all kinds (Falloux Law, 1850).

Yet, under the Second Empire, there was a growing animosity in secular society and Universities towards this easy diversion of the State authorities and the monopoly of a fraction of young people outside the official and public AlmaMater. Thus there developed in France a growing angry split between the supporters of a liberal education without State control and the partisans of secular society who carefully excluded Congregations and the clergy from all areas of teaching and scholastic institutions.

En 1883, the Ferry Law s proclaimed primary education, public, free and secular, reversing the process and political and ideological consensus set up after the Revolution.

This conquering secularism verging on sectarianism adopted a mission to exclude religion from schools and prohibited members of Congregations from teaching. Father d'Alzon approached this question not as a spectator but as a militant and committed actor. It was, moreover, one of the passions of his life that he shares with families today, concerned with giving their children the best kind of education and preparation for life through scholastic institutions that never cease to broaden their horizons, methods and programmes. He even had the satisfaction of seeing the lead up to the law for the liberty of higher education (Laboulaye Law, 1875), even if its content was soon to be emptied of significance by the new political regime after 1879. In any event, it is impossible to understand the life and activity of Father d'Alzon, or the early Assumption, if one ignores this educational and scholastic dimension at the heart of their respective existences.

The choice of a career and the blossoming of a vocation

Like all adolescents, Emmanuel faced all the questions and uncertainties of the young. Which profession should he choose to follow?

Military or Legal Profession?

He liked reading but also the army. There was a long tradition in the military in his family. His parents discouraged their son from taking this option, possibly superficial, and encouraged him to consider something in line with the legal profession with a leaning towards becoming a magistrate or entering politics..

It was without any real enthusiasm that Emanuel, in 1828, began his University studies in Law in Paris so he abandoned them in (1830) because of current events Already in his heart another cause was beginning to take root, not so much a career, more a proposition than an integrated life commitment. It did not divide up life, the person, or the activity but gave them an orientation

based on what he called his key idea: the role and place of God in his life and in society. He fell under the influence of several priests, the most famous of whom being Félicité de Lamennais, and his students friends in Paris (d'Esgrigny, Gouraud, de La Gournerie) who, all, urged him to wait. However, he preferred to put his project into action as soon as possible, but only after giving himself a two year period for reflection, in solitude and in his family, far from the political and media upheavals of the day (1830-1832).

To become a Priest?

The idea of a vocation to the priesthood for Emmanuel d'Alzon was not just a youthful fantasy or emotional ideal, but a fully weighed up, mature decision that evaluated the social cost of pursuing this kind of life.

For him, to become a priest meant a commitment to actively work to transform society with the means, the concepts and the methods available to the Church at that time.

“ For him to become a Priest meant a commitment to act and transform ”

At the beginning, Emmanuel was greatly influenced by the ferment of new ideas that emanating from de Lamennais, ideas that sought to liberate or sever the traditional religious links attached to or at the service of the monarchists and Gallicans.

To serve God

To serve God in society without submitting oneself to its traditional supports, to invent new relations with the social groups that had developed since the Revolution and were distant from the Church.

In his meditation and solitude at Lavagnac he welcomed in the depth of his being the gift of a priestly vocation to which he was not particularly predisposed, neither in his tastes, his habits, nor environment. Yet he knew how to open himself in great liberty from his environment so as not to become a prisoner of the prejudices of his milieu.

An Intellectual and spiritual retreat

He turned the time spent at Lavagnac between 1830 and 1832 into a prolonged intellectual and spiritual retreat, reading the Bible and the great authors of the Christian Tradition, in search of God, in search of himself, but also the overtones, the expectations and the new needs generated by a society still recovering from the shock of the Revolution. During this period Emmanuel appears to be more open to the numerous questions of society that remained unanswered, than being a young man comfortable with the easy certitudes of the dogmatists.

The Gruelling experience of the Major Seminary in Montpellier

After having vacillated for some time, Emmanuel finally chose to go to the Major Seminary in Montpellier in mid-March 1832; the seminary had reopened ten years earlier thanks to the Napoleonic Concordat (1802).

It was a rather rude awakening for this well bred, elegant young man, who had tasted Parisian life and was accustomed to the intellectual aerobics in vogue there than in this rather closed environment. What caused him most suffering was his friendship with Lamennais whose liberal ideas were greatly attacked by the local Bishop, Fournier de la Contamine and several professors still attached to Gallican ideals. At the end of the

school year in 1833, after having received minor orders, Emmanuel opted to go to Rome to continue his theological studies. Afterwards, he recognised the benefits of his time at Montpellier: the teaching of Father Ginoulhiac, a future Bishop, the beneficial friendship of several teachers not much older than he (Fathers Fabre and Vernières), the entire company illuminated by seminarians like the future Father Soulas, and a good training in liturgical piety

(sacraments, offices). His correspondence with his family gives us a perfect outline of the atmosphere, methods and life proper to a major seminary at that time. The theology had not yet recovered from the rupture of the Revolution. Life there, according to Emmanuel, was far too cut off from the intellectual ferment that stimulated the most illuminated circles of the intelligentsia at that time, especially the new religious expectations of the people. Thanks to the help and support of several priests, he followed the evolution of thought by secretly reading prohibited newspapers including one from Lamennais, L'Avenir , founded in November 1830, that had a finger on the pulse.

The happiness of being a priest, suffering for and by the Church

In November 1833, Emmanuel set off for Rome, the centre of Catholicism and, at that time Capital of the Papal States. He lodged at the convent of the Minimes close to Spanish Place and for a time followed courses at the Gregorian. On the advice of some Cardinals and theologians he knew (Micara, Mazzetti, Olivieri), Emmanuel decided to organise his own education in his room, taking notes from readings he chose. He also spent time discovering the joys of the eternal City, its ancient ruins, its architectural and pictorial heritage, and also benefiting from its animated liturgical life. He made friends with the young MacCarthy, then an English seminarian and the

future Cardinal Wiseman, trying not to extend himself with too many liabilities or worldly relationships to which his name allowed him. He was always vigilant, he opened his mind and his faith to the larger realities of the universal Church. But the pontificate of Gregory XVI, begun in 1831, was clearly conservative, initially distrustful then overtly hostile to the distress caused by a liberalism that questioned the political status-quo of an Italian peninsula divided into seven states.

The Menaisienne Test

The Menaisienne affair raged clumsily in the Roman Court from 1832 to 1834, in an atmosphere of anti-liberalism. This was a great Source of suffering for Emmanuel who until then felt great sympathy for the priest who was a symbol of an evolution consonant with the ideals of the day. He discovered that ecclesiastical Rome was also a centre of religious political scheming where the Gospel did not take first place and where Vatican diplomacy showed questionable disregard towards the powers of the world. He learned of the personal evolution of Lamennais who eventually removed himself from his ecclesiastical commitments, so Emmanuel, moved towards

the priesthood, his heart divided between his friendly trust for the man and his moral fidelity to the Church.

Fidelity without dependence At the heart of all these controversies and condemnations, he sought to maintain without repudiation, without dependence, both his love

for the Church and his friendship for Lamennais until the rupture consumed the latter. This purifying experience taught him that it was wise always to work for Rome, never against Rome, but sometimes without Rome.

Ordained a Priest

He did not waver from his spiritual search and had the happiness of being ordained a priest, in private, by Cardinal Odescalchi the day after Christmas in 1834. Firmly resolved to give priority in his life to the spiritual interests of the Church before any political or partisan considerations, he had the joy of an audience with Pope Gregory XVI before bringing his first stay in Roman to an end in May 1835. He returned joyfully and affectionately to his family at Lavagnac, happy to benefit from the early days of his priesthood after more than eighteen months absence.

In the service of the Diocese of Nîmes

After a meeting with the Bishop de Chaffoy of the Diocese (1835), who unequivocally dissuaded him from having any form of apostolate among the Protestants, Father d'Azon rapidly moved up the ecclesiastical ladder. Soon a Canon and then honorary Vicar General, he quickly mastered his new position and freed himself totally for for the animation of local Christian life, with a special interest in the youth, even to the point of attracting unkind judgments. He used his spirit and zeal with an unusual freedom and energy, upsetting well established ecclesiastical routines.

VicarGeneral

The successor to Bishop de Chaffroy another French-comtois, Msgr Cart, deliberately made him Vicar General in 1839, despite his young age, his lack of pastoral experience and a temperament diametrically opposed to his. Father d'Alzon refused to stay at the Episcopal Palace, preferring the freedom of a domicile in town which allowed him a certain degree of independence and a rhythm of life more in keeping with his tastes.

A desire for Unity

His preoccupation with the Protestants of the Midi saw him more than once step up and debate issues, but always with courtesy and with the sense of a personal relationship that encouraged a franc and free discussion of ideas along with an incontestable apostolic goodwill.

Ecumenism at that time was not active on either side, and, despite entrenched doctrinal and confessional positions, they knew how to agree on matters of public life, and human relationships were friendly, and, in some cases, pleasant (de Larcy, de La Farelle and Girard).

Major Projects

Three activities filled Father d'Alzon's attention from 1843: the installation of a Carmel in Nîmes, the privileged relationship of spiritual direction and friendship with a young founder in Paris, Mother Marie-Eugénie of Jesus, whom he met in 1838 through the intervention of the famous Father Combalot, and taking charge of a school that was in decline, that became the home of the Assumption that he wanted to make into a prestigious Catholic collage that was free: the College of the Assumption. Being the Director of this establishment increased his relationships with hundreds of parents of pupils who came from the whole Provence-Languedoc Region, placing Fr. d'Alzon in daily contact with young people. The school became his natural habitat until his death and deepened his concept of a Christian education that he never hesitated to assimilate into the work of the Incarnation: to form Jesus Christ in people. Everyone of note but also the lower families in society such as craftsmen and the working classes in Nîmes could not ignore the dynamism of this energetic priest who is now thinking of adopting the customs of religious life; being urged on by the apostolic spirit of the Religious of the Assumption, experienced in the work of education and the devotions

An evangelical adventure: the Assumption

From 1845 the College of the Assumption became the birthplace of a founder.

Thanks to the courageous and devoted lay help of Monnier and Germer-Durand, both University graduates, Father d'Alzon, despite the procrastinations of his Bishop, was inspired to create within his college a spiritual movement under the patronage of Saint Augustine and inspired by other religious orders. He combined the devotion of religious life found in the monastery with the zeal found in modern apostolic communities popular at that time. An association, in the style of a third order, gathered together lay men and women to help with the pastoral work of the young Assumption. This one, a masculine Religious family, began on Christmas eve, 1845, of humble origins, hidden away, like the Nativity at Bethlehem. The impressive Father d'Alzon, with four friends, Henri Brown, from Lozère, Victor Cardenne, from Paris, Étienne Pernet, from Franc-Comté, and Hippolyte Saugrain, from Normandy went against the tides and currents of the day, persevering in their religious commitment until finally making their first profession at Christmas 1850 and authorized by the reticent Bishop Cart.

An International opening

This very modest foundation gave birth to a new family in the church eventually spread to twenty-seven countries and to the four corners of the planet today. It has over 150 communities divided among eight provinces or vice-provinces, in which the usual language of communication marry a variety of territories and cultures from Africa, through America to Asia. A real mosaic of international humanity that seeks to live in a unity with its founding spirit that is evangelical and characteristic, serving the local Church and local populations, many of whom are on road of development.

Although born in Nîmes and French within an academic structure, the Congregation of the Augustinians of the Assumption owes to the faith of its founder and his first religious, the grace of a spiritual and apostolic beginning that constantly strives to move beyond the limited structures of its birth. This has continued throughout its history not without suffering or uncertainty, nor metamorphoses. During the lifetime of Father d'Alzon as a religious, between 1845 and 1880, there were 21 foundations or implantations of which seven were just ephemeral. He had only 73 religious to fulfil these works that included colleges, orphanages, parishes, houses of formation and alumnats (minor seminaries), distant missions, the press, preaching and pilgrimages. So this unity of life and spirit was from its origins a multilateral fight,

carried out in the name of the Gospel and in response to the call of the Church at that time.

A triple Love

The Assumption embodies a vigorous spirit of faith that it developed in the form of the love of Christ, the Virgin Mary and the Church, under a banner entitled:

A.R.T., the motto of the Assumption; an expression taken from the prayer of Jesus, the Our Father:

Your Kingdom Come

A Rule of Life

The human and spiritual history of an exceptional man does not engender in itself the survival of a social group. To face the passages of time and to inspire it with authentic evangelical vigour, the Assumption must give of itself and receive food for its religious journey. The first Constitutions drawn up between 1855 and 1865 by Father d'Alzon and the General Chapters, were entirely reformulated in 1923 at the cost of agonizing sacrifices contain the formula of this founding spirit up to the present Rule of life, published in 1983! Yet these texts will never be able to completely express the problems and the risks of thousands of faithful actions experienced and fostered by the Assumption yesterday, today and tomorrow for the Adveniat of the Kingdom. Religious life could easily be dulled in its contact with the everyday difficulties inherent in the routines and pitfalls of daily life, if, as it evolved, it did not constantly receive renewed and refreshing impulses from the continuing calls and needs of the Church and society. Father d'Alzon understood this well in his own time when he did not hesitate to sacrifice the communities at Rethel (1859) and Clichy (1860) when he decided to withdraw the mission from Australia (1875).

A Faithful Creativity

Like love, the life spirit of a foundation is to be found in being faithful to its creativity, as much in

terms of its possible continuity as in unforeseen tragedies: the turmoil of World War I ravaged the Orient, decolonisation removed the Assumption from Tunisia and Algeria, the lack of vocations eats away the communities in the Northern hemisphere. The positive choice of calls and evangelical challenges by a Congregation eager to work for people made in the image of God in its quest for unity, truth and solidarity, present us with a vision and an ideal that leaves us in permanent tension. It is true that at the Assumption several «human territories» have experienced its preferences, its character or its historic dreams: places like Turkey, the Balkans, Russia and even faraway Manchuria, but the Assumption cannot afford to be over nostalgic about its choice of territories yesteryear. Its apostolates led it to work with generous faith and take unforeseen directions into unknown territories like Madagascar in 1953, the Congo in 1929, Latin America in 1890 and Mexico in 1948, all this without prejudice to the virgin territories newly encountered today and tomorrow: East Africa (Tanzania and Kenya), Ecuador (1996), South Korea (1991) and more recently the Philippines, Togo and Vietnam (2006); all with God's help, and under the patronage of Our Lady of Salvation and with the ardour of missionary pioneers.

Father d'Alzon, a magnificent figure

Rut let us return to Father d'Alzon's era. This flamboyant title, "a magnificent figure", was bestowed on him by Father André Sève in the spiritual biography that he wrote for the centenary of our founder's death in 1980. He did not try to conceal the trials and sufferings that life inflicted on him, but he tried to give an account of everything that Emmanuel was conscience of having received: education, fortune, relations, without the false easiness of a bourgeois spirit that, according to him, have crippled the best of characters. On the contrary, Father d'Alzon learned the art of embellishing what nature gave him like characteristics of the Cévenol. He knew how to gradually evangelise the prominent features a character that that was jolly, free, humorous and ironic, and, similarly his authoritative impulsiveness, although he was never able to completely free himself from the severity of his highland roots.

In difficult Territory

With a very lively Catholic faith and drinking a water laced with anti- Protestantism, he became an Ultramontanist of the Veillot, always alert and often aggressive. A southerner in spirit, Father d'Alzon breathed in the ardour and pugnacious vivacity of this "white" population of Southern France and was easily carried away by the fevered passions of politics and religion. Nîmes was a city sadly accustomed to apoplectic passion that made the region a bastion of Catholic Legitimists (Ultra-Royalists) interwoven with large pockets of Protestantism, liberals, and later republicans: as seen in 1789, 1830, 1848, 1851 and even in 1870. The century was

fertile with the birth of new democracies which often led to confrontations with inter-denominational warriors. Christianity at that time always sought to pave a way that fell between the difficult extremes of the modernists and the dissatisfactory traits of the traditionalists. It could not escape the buffeting caused by these changes. It was this demanding but intellectually intolerant Catholicism, called Ultramontanism, into which the founder tried to draw the clergy of his diocese. The bourgeoisie generally claimed to favour liberalism, supported by an active minority from Protestant circles that saw in the ideals of the Revolution a bastion against the inequalities of the Ancien Régime . This tendency contrasted with the masses of the working class who did not hide

their royalist support or their devotion to demonstrative Catholicism: processions, illuminations, public display of Marian and Eucharistic worship that was triumphalist and anti-Protestant.

The difficult periods of political turmoil that struck the country in 1815, 1830 and 1848, shattered the fragile consensus established between the communities. Despite his authoritative tone and his complete ease with principles, Father d'Alzon is one of those who, in practical terms, prepared the people for unavoidable compromises (especially in elections). As Vicar General between 1839 and 1878 he mixed with all the local eminent people (municipal, prefecture, scholars), overlooking partisan differences when the questions were not a matter of doctrine. Despite his background he was not afraid of all the recent technical innovations (the railroad, sewing machine, the telephone) that offered new possibilities to people's lives. Over many years despite numerous responsibilities and a multitude of enterprises, his energy never flagged.

Serving the Kingdom

He refused to let himself be given the mitre or the crosier that his friends tried to offer him at Mende, Aire-sur-Adour and even at Nîmes. Down to earth, he was not interested in an ecclesiastical career, but accepted responsibility for the pastoral supervision of his diocese and the dynamism of new works that had sprung to life in Paris and Lyons (the Propagation of the Faith, Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul, the Work of Saint François de Sales, Christian Worker Movements), he wanted to be embellished with a Nîmois spirit. His frequent journeys to Paris were motivated by his pastoral concerns: the animation and launching of new works, preaching, links with the Religious of the Assumption.

Against this backdrop, his life developed into a never ending series of journeys constantly taken

for new reasons and in response to new needs: the struggle for the freedom of teaching, social transformation, foreign missions, journalism. Father d'Alzon himself was always being stimulated by the new currents and needs produced by a society that was constantly undergoing transformation. He sought ways for the ecclesiastical body to most benefit from all this or, when the case arose, to protect it.

The Final Decade of Combat

Already in 1868, during a General Chapter, Father d'Alzon anticipated the importance of various changes and evolution in his apostolic objectives: to serve the common good of the masses rather than to concentrate his efforts only on the elite. Suffering from health problems in 1854, he reassessed his apostolic work in the light of a more interior, even mystical, reflection attested to in the maturity of his writings (The Directory 1859, Letters to the Novice Masters 1868, Circulars and Meditations after 1870), which added an important dimension to his natural dynamism which might appear to some only as the work of an activist.

Pastoral Priorities

Under the influence of various religious, especially Father Étienne Pernet and the Parisian Religious (François Picard, Vincent de Paul Bailly, and Hippolyte Saugrain), it still seemed courageous to him to reorient some of his pastoral priorities for the masses and for people in terms of pilgrimages, the popular press, minor seminaries and apostolic schools for the poor (which the Assumption call "alumnats"), conferences and worker movements that flourished after 1871. He was involved in animating popular movements, giving free reign to his younger religious who had experienced military prisoner camps after the defeat in 1870. The excesses of the Paris Commune in 1871 certainly did not moderate his own political preferences for the restoration of the monarchy, but stimulated his desire to respond to the more social demands that arose at this time. This generation of his disciples, while not abandoning the field of education, knew how to be innovative in this sense and assist him in this larger impulse.

Great Figures bubbling with ideas

In Paris, Father Picard mobilised the clergy and interested crowds of people in the Association

of Notre Dame de Salut, founded in 1872 (with campaigns of public prayer). Father Vincent de Paul Bailly took the small bulletin published for pilgrims in 1873, begun at La Salette, and transformed it in 1877 into an attractive domestic and amusing magazine in which the caricatures played an eye-catching role in the political debates at that time. A short time later (1880) La Croix appeared – this Review very quickly became a daily newspaper (1883). In Paris, Father Pernet, who formed Fraternities of lay people connected with the Little Sisters of the Assumption (who looked after the sick at home unpaid), also entered the field of social Catholicism.

From Nîmes, Father d'Alzon whose age was beginning to take its toll, supervised this ferment of ideas and actions that inspired in him strong sympathy and criticism, but in which he recognized the generous vigour of his own youth and the lively faith of his spirit. He never questioned the strength of the Assumption, which, despite its small numbers of religious, launched out on many more fronts than it had members!

The Relief

A new youth was being formed in the minor seminary - alumnats whose upkeep was entrusted to Providence. Many and generous donors, who formed the association of Notre Dame des Vocations, financed the apostolic activities of the Assumption. Without their contribution many of these impulses would not have been realised. They would have been left as paper projects locked away in convent drawers! Father d'Alzon knew this well, throughout his life he underwent according to him "the martyrdom of money" in which he generously used up his domestic heritage on innumerable works whose profits would never be listed on the Stock market where the bourgeois spirit that disgusted him triumphed. Prince or Knight of the Kingdom, he did not depend on the goods or generosity of this world except in the manner of the gospel, which meant subjugating them freely to the worthy aims of his convictions and concerns. On his death bed, he replied to his doctor, who compared his depleted health to that of a worn-out capital, that he can now leave after having damaged many others!

Like Augustine, on the banks and ruins of Hippo

The death of Father d'Alzon is reminiscent of that of our Patriarch from the Occident. One knows that Augustine spent all his life in Africa in the setting of the Roman Empire which he admired for its organisation, administration and culture.

Before the increasing invasions of “barbarian” forces including the Vandals undermined the structures of this empire and affected the development of Christianity, he died in 430 facing a profound decline in the future.

The Ultimate Test

More than fourteen centuries later, Father d'Alzon for his part faced a similar experience. In France, the anticlerical republican forces, until then held back, now filled the the State and heralded dark days in scholastic programmes focused on secularism, especially for the young communities who had no legal protection or guarantee.

The college in Nîmes suffered the effects of the Ferry decrees that expelled from teaching those who avoided any form of government authority. Father d'Alzon knew his communities were threatened and already prepared for their next exile. Yet it was in great serenity that the “Lion of the C évennes” took his leave of this earth, after having taken the time to prepare himself spiritually for eternity and had the sense to nominate someone to succeed him as head of his religious families; another great witness of faith and character, Father François Picard.

His Last Breath

On Sunday 21 November 1880, the feast of Mary's Presentation, Father Emmanuel d'Alzon left to his followers the strength of a spirit that no tomb could hold down and no power on this earth could break.

Even if history slates men in whatever way they chose, a religious force born from the Gospel finds the strength and ability ability to adapt and renew itself as time passes and events unfold with the freedom to invent new and sometimes unexpected paths.

The Church validated the spiritual legacy of Father Emmanuel d'Alzon in December 1991,

awarding him the title of Venerable, the first stage in a future beatification hoped and prayed for.

For more information about the

Assumptionists please see www.assumptionist.org.uk

Information about days on Assumptionist Spirituality

Lay Assumptionists

see: www.assumptionist.org.uk

Main web site for the Assumptionists

www.assumptio.org/e

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May the Assumption seek before all else the Kingdom of God, and may it receive an increase in brothers, unity, joy and its courage to serve, let us pray to the Lord.

Response: Lord, may your Kingdom Come!

May the Assumption be faithful to the spirit of its founder in its love for Christ, the Virgin Mary and the Church, let us pray to the Lord.

May the Assumption, faithful to the mission of Christ, like him be present to the world and protected from all evil, let us pray to the Lord.

May the Assumption love and serve the Church in the example of Christ who loved her and died for her, let us pray to the Lord.

May the Assumption, with hope and in prayer, welcome that day when the Church the sanctity of Father Emmanuel d'Alzon, let us pray to the Lord.

« Emmanuel d'Alzon founder of the Augustinians of the Assumption and Oblates of the Assumption » is part of the collection « Your Kingdom Come ».

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