

***“The jar of flour shall not go empty,
nor the jug of oil run dry.”***

(1 Kings 17:14)



Letter n.1

to the congregation

Implementation of the 34th General Chapter

*“For the Lord, the God of Israel says:
the Jar of flour shall not go empty,
nor the jug of oil run dry.” (1 Kings 17: 14)*

INTRODUCTION

Dear brothers and sisters,

I have deliberately chosen to use this common formula “Dear brothers and sisters” to introduce you to this letter you have in your hands. Yes, it's a letter. You may have been waiting for it, but here it is, addressed to you. It's addressed to the whole family, lay and religious alike, even if the content seems to favor the religious.

One of the brothers asked me: when will you write your first letter to the congregation? I knew I had to, but it wasn't time yet. The time that elapsed between this question and the start of the writing was important. It allowed me to move away from the idea of simply fulfilling a tradition, to really feel the need to communicate something that came from my heart. I didn't want to get something “out of the library”, but out of everyday life, which challenges and calls out to us.

I'm sure you've read some of my early speeches in various forms. From my first (more or less structured) speech as Superior General, you'll notice that there's a concern that's close to my heart: what will tomorrow be made of? This question is at the heart of my prayer and my thinking, and it also appears, in various

forms, in the meetings and conversations I've had with some of you.

On several occasions, when I speak to a religious (especially those in positions of responsibility), I ask him about other brothers, either in the community or in the entity where he lives. Occasionally, I receive responses in which I read the following: *“Here, all the brothers are doing well and courageously assuming their respective missions.”* You can just imagine the joy I feel when I read such a message. As a result, my prayers are not only prayers of petition, but also of thanksgiving. If you've ever wondered how you could help the Superior General in his mission, perhaps this is the way to do it: by courageously assuming the task entrusted to you. Thanks in advance to those who are already doing so. But, as you know, this is not a time for gifts.

I don't want to start this letter by suggesting that we have “big problems” to solve. But neither would I want you to think that we don't have serious questions to ask ourselves. The reality, which I already mentioned in the editorial of the first issue of *AA-info*, is constantly feeding the chronicles of our times, sometimes with fatalistic predictions.

These are troubled times for our Church. The instability of the world is affecting all strata of our societies, and we live in perpetual uncertainty about tomorrow. Our Congregation is not spared. And all this, at a time when we are talking about “the change in our Congregation's center of gravity”¹. You know what this means, and the consequences and worries that can follow. Fear is within our walls. And why not! Even if this fear is legitimate, I wanted to write to you to warn you of the paralysis that it could result.

¹ Acts of the 34th General Chapter n. 71.

Using the story of the prophet Elijah and the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17:7-16) and taking as the title of this letter the prophetic promise expressed there, I'd like to spur us on towards a more courageous and mobilizing faith, hope and charity.

I don't pretend to offer you ready-made recipes, but I do want to provoke personal and community discernment that will stimulate us to continue our “walking together” in life and mission, without letting ourselves be paralyzed by situations. But this, of course, presupposes consistent attitudes and a new awareness. People say, “*Times are bad, times are hard. Let's live well and times will be good.*”² These words of Saint Augustine form the “breadcrumbs” of my message. Happy reading!

² Saint Augustine (*Sermones* 80, 8).

I. FACING REALITY

When, in casual conversation, someone pretends to be completely unaware of a situation when they should know better, Spanish speakers use the expression: “*No te hagas*”, which can be translated as: “Don't pretend”. Faced with certain realities, we sometimes pretend not to be informed, not to be affected, not to be concerned - worse still, to simply ignore them. Yet there are some realities which, by their very importance, should deliberately occupy a prominent place in our thoughts, prayers and schedules.

I.1. This world created by God “heats up”

The world we live in presents a series of situations and challenges that are not always easy to understand. My intention in talking about this world “heating up” is not to offer an explanation, nor to alarm you unnecessarily. There are experts who have already done so, and who continue to do so. That would be too bold of me. If I come back to some of these questions, my aim is, even if it's difficult to understand exactly what's going on, to consider these situations in our respective lives and missions. The 34th General Chapter of our Congregation has sent us to proclaim the hope of the Gospel precisely to our brothers and sisters who are living the consequences of these situations up close.

Numerous experts and thinkers are writing essays and providing guidelines for understanding today's society. The geopolitical and environmental situation concerns us all, and it's important to avoid the temptation to believe that it's not our problem. Pope Francis is clear on this point. He believes that something can still be done, that the Church can play a very important role in raising awareness and providing *leadership* for a new consciousness, and that even small gestures count. Who doesn't remember his first trip outside

Rome to the island of Lampedusa? (July 2013)? It was a clear sign of his radical option to defend those who suffer, the most vulnerable and those excluded from society.

I was pleased to note that during the General Chapter, we were challenged and touched by what was happening in the world. The war between Russia and Ukraine mobilized the media. The Pope mentioned it in his speech when he received us in audience. And to be even more concrete in our reflection and our desire to do something, the Chapter had encouraged the Province of Europe to begin a reflection on the conditions of possibility for a refoundation in Ukraine (Acts of the 34th General Chapter n. 47).

This is the approach I encourage you to take at different levels of reflection. That is to say, to always strive to arrive at concrete orientations, so as not to dwell on purely emotional and theoretical considerations. I saw how, at the time, in the Province of Europe, the Provincial asked us to take concrete action in line with *Laudato si'*. This led to actions that are now part of daily practice in some communities.

Faced with the multiplicity of situations and challenges, there is always the temptation to want to give up. Yet, in the face of a divided world still over-run by conflicts here and there, with regions where this has been going on for years (as in the D.R. Congo, West Africa and many other places); in the face of the number of displaced people who continue to increase for various reasons; in the face of political tensions rooted in geopolitical positions; in the face of the consequences of global warming that can only worry us - we want to be artisans of peace and unity, and work for the integrity of creation.

In a video message, Pope Francis talks about the various crises affecting our world and our societies, and calls on everyone to take the situation seriously: “*We don't come out of a crisis unscathed: either we come out better, or we come out worse,*” he said. He

recognizes that it's a complex task, so we have to be honest and consistent in our approach.

Let's not overlook the small efforts we can make. If they prove insufficient in the face of the magnitude and scale of the damage, they are nonetheless a sign of awareness from which other, perhaps even more effective, initiatives can be taken. We must not minimize the power of “small gestures” in our communities, even if they do not immediately have a noticeable quantitative effect, because they help to set in motion great processes of transformation that operate from the depths of society (*Laudate Deum* n. 71).

“Where are we going?” Many people ask themselves, perhaps even with some anxiety. When we read the newspapers and follow the media, we can legitimately be afraid. But this is our world: “*God so loved the world*” (John 3:16). So we are called to love it. It is in this world, loved by God, that we are called to live, and it is towards it that we are called to proclaim hope. Happy are we if we live this mission with joy. Yet the Church, which must play a *leadership role in addressing the situation*, is also in crisis.

1.2. The Church we love is in crisis

Our Church, which is called to be “*the salt of the earth and the light of the world*”, is in crisis. There's no other way to put it. And yet it is called to be the light of hope. I have a nephew who isn't Catholic, but for some time now he's been forwarding me WhatsApp messages about what's happening in the (Catholic) Church, and it's always to ask if the message is genuine. “Is that true?” he keeps asking me. I'd even thought of asking him to stop forwarding me such messages, but why stop him?

The crisis created by the revelation of abuses committed in the Church, and the resulting awareness of the need for reform in

many aspects of Church life, is serious. Several Conferences of Bishops and Religious have taken up the task in earnest, but the magnitude of the situation still gives cause for concern.

It's true that throughout the history of the Church, we can see that every era has experienced a certain crisis. But today's crisis is making its presence felt in the media, and even in the conversations of those who a few years ago were indifferent or uninformed. Today, a message from the Holy Father in the Vatican echoes even in the most remote village on the planet. This is a good thing. But also, with the same speed, information about sexual abuse and other reprehensible behavior is spreading.

The crisis we are going through as a Church is causing not only pain, but also confusion in some, discouragement in others, and even rebellion in still others. As sons of Emmanuel d'Alzon, this situation should re-double our love for this Church, our Mother. In a letter to his friend Montalembert (1834, from Rome), Emmanuel d'Alzon, speaking of hypocritical hatred on the part of the Church's enemies, asked him to renounce his sorrows and embrace the great sorrows of the Church, because they were enough to fill his whole heart (letter to Montalembert from Rome, March 1834).

How can we not be deeply moved by what is happening? We are heirs to Emmanuel d'Alzon, for whom the cause of the Church was among the things he would not negotiate. *“The love of the Church, the defense of its rights, the study of its teachings, the sanctity of its members, and the extension of its influence, that is my goal, because by dedicating myself to the Church I am dedicating myself to the preeminent work of Jesus Christ.”* (*Spiritual Writings* [S.W.] p. 540) Isn't it time we remembered that we are sons and heirs of a founder who loved the Church with all his heart?

Difficult moments must be faced with serenity, because they can lead to spiritual growth. Depending on how we handle them, they

can be a turning point for better or for worse. When our founder Emmanuel d'Alzon experienced what he called his “way of the cross” due to a sudden and serious illness, it was also for him the occasion of a “spiritual conversion”. Our *Directory*, written during this time of suffering, was one of the fruits of this. You will no doubt recall his correspondence with Mother Marie-Eugénie: “*Let me confess that my illness does me a great deal of good, and, while I pray to God to deliver me from it, I thank Him for making me understand so well by this means that one must rely only on His strength in all things human and supernatural.*” (Letter to Marie-Eugénie, January 15, 1856). “*All in all, my stay at Lamalou was very useful. I'm not just talking about my health, which seems to be taking a fairly good turn, but above all for my soul, which is resting, calming down and which, in its long hours of solitude, feels the need to return ever more under God's hand.*” (Letter to Marie-Eugénie, June 12 1856)

The current crisis is revealing divisions even within the Church. It requires us to open our eyes to see, and our ears to hear the call to discern the signs of the times. Let's take advantage of this period of crisis as an opportunity for change and hope. As with any process of change, conversion is necessary. The General Chapter called us to live this conversion: “*The Kingdom of God has come near to us. Its coming invites us to be attentive to the calls of the world and spurs us on to many conversions to bring about the Kingdom of God.*” (Acts of the General Chapter n. 1). Yes, we exist for “the coming of the Kingdom of God within us and around us”. This call to conversion is not addressed to others, but to us. Where are we on this journey of personal and community conversion?

I.3. Our Congregation is not spared

I've decided to return to the realities that the world and Mother Church are going through: a necessary step to ask ourselves how these situations challenge us, while at the same time facing up to our own realities as a congregation. Without going back over what has already been said about the various crises affecting religious life in general, I'd like to focus here on the case of our congregation, without claiming to be exhaustive or to repeat what has already been said. My predecessor, Fr. Benoît Grière, in his report to the 34th General Chapter, already spoke of the fragility of the old Provinces, the fragility of the young Assumptionist realities, the lack of economic resources for the young Provinces, the challenge of community life and the life of the vows, and so on. He also spoke several times of the need to improve the sharing of goods.

In the last few months alone, I've taken part in three major meetings of Superiors General, at different levels and in different circumstances. After talking and listening to some of them, I have the impression that other congregations are experiencing the same difficulties. For the moment, I'll just mention four of them (without going into detail), as they are my main concerns, without, of course, underestimating the importance of the other issues.

It seems that, in the still recent past, the presence of a religious community - or better still: religious people in a neighborhood or village - was visible. Not only through a building and its works, sometimes imposing, but above all through a lifestyle that made them the talk of the town. In a way, they were what Jesus had intended: *“the salt of the earth and the light of the world”*.

There are preferential choices for the excluded and the sick, but above all a lifestyle that was consistent with what they said about themselves. Today, most of these social works or heroic acts of charity are carried out by governments or NGOs. What's left for us? Perhaps, essentially, to confirm our brothers and sisters around

us in the faith and to be witnesses to the values of the Church, through our personal and community lives. In short, it is a question of taking up the challenge of the relevance of our Assumptionist life.

The second aspect I'd like to highlight is that of *leadership*. Much was said at the last General Chapter about the high number of “first-time capitulants”. And I was one of them! Today, it's the younger generations who are in charge of the formation and government of our Congregation. This is certainly a good thing. But in the meantime, we're discovering that there aren't many who are prepared for these kinds of responsibilities. We have had Provincials who have had to serve 3 terms: this is not a good sign; something is not right. So, in thanking the younger generations who are courageously and faithfully taking on their responsibilities, we have decided, at the Ordinary General Council, to accompany you. I hope we'll do well.

During the General Chapter, we returned at length to the question of the “*missionary character of the Congregation*”. This is the third aspect I'd like to highlight. We spoke of the Assumptionist “missionary fiber” that follows the “spiritual fiber” that has already been the subject of an appendix in our *Ratio*³. How can we awaken, form and accompany a new generation of passionate missionaries? There was a session in Rome in 2019 on rereading the missionary experience, which resulted in a number of recommendations that I would like to see taken seriously by all religious. These recommendations concern not only those who go

³ See *Ratio Institutionis* - Appendix 1.

far away, but also those who participate in this mission by receiving those who arrive⁴.

As you know, issues related to the relevance of our personal and community life, efficient *leadership* and mobilization for the mission of the Congregation, need to be taken seriously through formation. This is my final point. Our initial and ongoing formation is life and mission-oriented. The Congregation is investing heavily in formation. Several sessions for formators are already planned. It's not for lack of initiative or proposals for other types of sessions that we've focused on formation for the next six years: it's a choice. This choice is motivated by the importance we give to this preparation for life and mission. If we don't take this seriously, we run the risk of allowing the already worrying signs of fragility to develop.

I.4. Fragility as a condition of the human being and of all structure

I'd like to conclude this first part, which deals with the presentation of reality, by emphasizing the fragility that characterizes not only human beings, but also structures and all human endeavors. We want to continue living and proclaiming the hope of the Gospel, but life confronts us with our fragility. What do we do with them? Accepting the reality of fragility is sometimes challenging, but it has to be done. It's perhaps the first step towards a serene life.

Even with fragility, we can still revitalize the life and mission of this Church, our Mother, and of our religious family. It's not a question of trying to get out of this state of fragility, nor of trying

⁴ The proceedings of this session can be found on the Congregation's website, in the section: <https://www.assumptio.org/en/documents> (see tab "Missionary fiber").

to fight it, but of accepting it so that this acceptance leads us, according to Jean-Louis Chrétien, to a kind of elevation towards another dimension of life⁵. We need to be aware that it will always be difficult to claim that this question (of fragility) has been resolved, and that we can move on to something else. Rather, it's a matter of working our way through the path to a happy and rewarding life, despite the trials and realities we face today.

We'll be unhappy if fragility and a vulnerable life paralyze us to the point of no longer desiring to live. Even if life becomes difficult and our efforts don't seem to produce the desired results, let's continue to expand our desire for true brotherhood, authentic holiness, effective justice and peace. Saint Augustine reminds us of this, asking us to widen our reservoirs by considering the importance of what we are waiting for: *“The whole life of the good Christian is made up of a holy desire. Now, what you desire, you do not yet see, but by desiring, you become fit to be filled when what you are to see has come. In the same way, in fact, if you want to fill a pocket and you know the size of what you're going to be given, you enlarge the pocket, whether it's a bag or a wineskin, or anything else. You know how much you're going to put in, and you realize that the pouch is too small; by enlarging it you make it capable of receiving more.”*⁶ What is our desire? Isn't it to live and proclaim the Hope of the Gospel?

My first editorial for *AA-News* was entitled: *“Taking it one step further”*. It's not that I ignore the difficulties and hazards of life. But it's because I'm convinced that this is what we want. Here's what I wrote and say again, because it's in my heart:

“Who doesn't know, see or feel it? These are troubled times for our Church. The world's instability is affecting all levels of

⁵ Jean-Louis Chrétien, *Fragilité*, Éditions de Minuit, 2017, p. 137.

⁶ Augustine of Hippo, *Homilies on the 1^{ère} epistle of John*, Treatise IV, 6.

society. And we live in perpetual uncertainty about tomorrow. Our Congregation is not spared. Yes, “taking a step further”, which is our desire, which should also become our prayer, (“Your desire is your prayer”, said Saint Augustine - commentary on Psalm 37), will have to pass through a sieve that will require conversion on our part. This God who calls us and sends us, in alliance with our lay brothers and sisters, to be signs of hope, tells us: “Do not fear, I am with you”. (Jeremiah 42:11)”

This promise was renewed by Jesus Christ: “*And I am with you always, to the very end of the age*”. (Matthew 28:20). Who said it was the end of the world? This life, though fragile and vulnerable, is still worth living.

II. THE CULTURE OF CARE

The positive note that ends this presentation of reality necessarily leads us to the following question: how is this possible? It was certainly a providential coincidence for us to celebrate our General Chapter while the Church was preparing for the Synod on Synodality. This event, of great importance, cannot remain without reverberations. Even if further meetings will conclude this process, things have already been said and proposals put forward to enable us to move forward as a Church. Other sectors of society could certainly benefit too. It seems to me that, among the calls of this Synod, there are some that can help us to *take care of* ourselves, of others, of our vocations, of our mission. This calls for a conversion towards certain indispensable dispositions or attitudes, such as humility and mutual listening.

II.1. Take care of yourself

If our human condition and structures are marked by fragility and vulnerability, isn't this a call to develop a culture of “taking care”⁷? Perhaps we don't talk about it enough, but I think it's important to take care of ourselves. Everything else depends on it. To take care of the integrity of Creation is to love it; to take care of others is to love them. But the Scriptures ask us to love God and to love others as we love ourselves⁸. There are behaviors and attitudes that clearly make those around us wonder if we have any love left for ourselves. It's not for nothing that Latinos often say to themselves “*Cuidate*” in parting. The English say “*Take care!*”, which simply

⁷ Cfr. *A Culture of Care and Protection. New Challenges for Consecrated Life*, Edited by the Pontifical Commission for the protection of minors and the International union of superiors general, 2023.

⁸ *Matthew 22:39: "Love your neighbor as yourself.*

means, “Take care of yourself.” It's not a perfunctory wish, it's a reminder: “My brother, my sister, take care of yourself!”

Because of the importance of the issue and the situation of sexual abuse in the Church, in 2019 the Pope published an apostolic letter entitled *Vos estis lux mundi* - “You are the light of the world”. In this letter, we find procedures for preventing and combating these abuses that “*offend our Lord and cause physical, psychological and spiritual damage to the victims and harm the community of the faithful*”. To prevent the recurrence of abuse in all its forms, we need “*a continuous and profound conversion of hearts*”. Taking care of oneself means intentionally setting out on this path of conversion. This conversion is only possible, the Pope continues, through the grace of the Holy Spirit. “*Apart from me, you can do nothing*”. (Jn 15:5)

Physical, psychological and spiritual damage is done not only to others, but sometimes to ourselves. Some guidelines have been given at the Congregational level. I would remind you that there are two annexes in the new *Ratio Institutionis*: “Accompaniment and spiritual fiber” on the one hand, and “Health and religious life” on the other. There are risky behaviors that are avoidable, and on this point co-responsibility and vigilance deserve to be recalled. “*Taking care of one's own formation is the response that every baptized person is called to give to the Lord's gifts, in order to make the talents received bear fruit and put them at the service of all.*”⁹

Jean Monbourquette (in his book *De l'estime de soi à l'estime du Soi*) is convinced that “*spiritual maturity requires a strong sense of 'I' on a psychological level, and that the psychological growth of the ego is diminished if it is not based on the care of the soul or on spiritual resources*”.

⁹ *CF. Synthesis Report, ch. 14, letter a. Synod on synodality (first part 2023)*

This self-esteem, which is made up of self-love and self-confidence, needs to be worked on, and this work, according to the same author, requires sustained efforts of intelligence and will power. Agreeing to take this path also means taking care of ourselves.

This work of “taking care of ourselves” needs to be renewed every day. The realities we experience and encounter on the path of our personal and community life show us that nothing is resolved once and for all. You may recall our founder's questioning of himself, which can help us in our own way of taking care of ourselves, without which it would be illusory to claim to take care of others: *“I know vaguely – at least I think I do - what I want to do with myself. But I have never dredged my own depths. I have never determined the exact means I intend to use in order to achieve my goal. Today, this is exactly what I seriously intend to do. I want to know clearly what I am, what I want to be, and what means I will take to become what I want to be.”*¹⁰

II.2. Take care of the other

We are a vulnerable society¹¹. We shouldn't really wait for Sandra Laugier to tell us this, because it seems obvious and, if so, we shouldn't even be asked to take care of each other, because it should be everyone's business and flow naturally. Yet it took the Covid-19 pandemic to expose our vulnerabilities, both institutional and personal. Our interdependence is no longer in question. It's as if we're all on board the same ship and we're experiencing the same storm, albeit to different degrees. The synodal spirit awakens our interdependence and calls us to support each other. The ever-increasing cries of migrants, victims of

¹⁰ *S.W. p. 681s.*

¹¹ *Sandra Laugier, Tous vulnérables, Payot, 2012.*

sexual abuse and/or abuse of power, and the poor must not leave us alone. Our God is a liberating God, a God who continually cares for his people.

From the outset, the Acts of the 34th Chapter underline this call to care for our common home and the vulnerable: *“Recent years have seen a growing awareness of the need to respect Creation and protect our common home. Inscribed at the heart of humanity, fraternity drives us to welcome migrants, to strive for peace and build a just society, to care for the most vulnerable at the heart of the Covid-19 pandemic. Christians from all walks of life are driven by a strong desire for holiness. The Church has become more aware of the need to protect minors and the vulnerable. It has also embarked on a synodal process to reflect on its own functioning. Major texts by Pope Francis, who invites us to a conversion to integral ecology, have given Christians a breath of fresh air to face up to these challenges.”*¹²

With the Year of Mercy in 2015, the Pope wanted us to experience God's love that *“consoles, forgives and gives hope”*. ". I hope we haven't forgotten the logo for this Year of Mercy, in which we see the Good Shepherd carrying Man (who represents the whole of humanity) on his shoulders, with an important detail: one of the Good Shepherd's two eyes merges with Man's, so that Man can see as God sees. So, since this God, in revealing himself to Moses, said to him: *“I have seen, I have seen the misery of my people who dwell in Egypt... I am determined to deliver them from the hand of the Egyptians...”* (Ex 3:7-8), there is a call for us too. Perhaps it's time to listen again to Pope Francis' two questions from his trip to Lampedusa, repeated in his message for Lent 2024: *“Where are you?”* (Gn 3:9) and *“Where is your brother?”* (Gn 4:9):

¹² Acts of the 34th General Chapter n. 2.

“Adam, where are you?”: this is the first question God addresses to man after sin. “Where are you, Adam?”. Adam is a disoriented man who has lost his place in creation because he believes he has become powerful, that he can dominate everything, that he is God. And the harmony breaks down, man makes a mistake, and this is also repeated in the relationship with the other, who is no longer the brother to love, but simply the one who disturbs my life, my well-being. God asks the second question: “Cain, where is your brother? The dream of being powerful, of being great like God, or rather of being God, generates a chain of errors, which is a chain of death, since it leads to death!”¹³

It's hard to show love for others if you don't really love yourself. Commenting on the commandment *“Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself”*, Saint Thomas Aquinas tells us that love of self is the model for love of others (*Summa Th.*, IIa, Q 26, art. 4). And in this case, it prevails in terms of principle. People who have lost self-esteem or self-love (quite different from egoism) also lose the ability to love others.

II.3. Taking care of our vocation and our mission

“The existence of all religious families had a raison d'être” (a purpose), our founder reminds us (S.W. p. 123). What is the *raison d'être* of our Congregation? Fr. d'Alzon simply wants to draw our attention to the greatness of our vocation. Yes, we dare the impossible, and that is what honors us. It's sad to see that what our founder said in his day is more topical than ever: *“It is becoming clearer each day that God has been driven out of governments, family life, and morality.”* (S.W. p. 124) If our *raison d'être* is the *Adveniat Regnum Tuum*, then, as Emmanuel d'Alzon says, our

¹³ Homily by Pope Francis, "Arena" sports field, Lampedusa, July 8, 2013.

vocation is admirable. If our *raison d'être* is *Adveniat Regnum Tuum*, then, as Emmanuel d'Alzon says, our vocation is admirable: “*From this point of view, if it is true, as we believe it is, that God calls us, then our vocation is admirable, both by its timeliness and the greatness of its goal.*” (Ibidem)

Taking care of this vocation means remembering every day how great it is, but how difficult and misunderstood it is. There is a risk of getting lost, continues Fr. d'Alzon, “*on activities which might be useful and even excellent in themselves, but which in fact would distract us not only from the path we should walk, but also from the efforts we should be making and from the success we should be striving to attain with God's grace.*”¹⁴

But how can we remain faithful to this vocation, in a world that tends to erase it from the list of reasonable priorities? It seems to me that we need to revisit our apostolic choices and priorities, to see if they are still linked to our *raison d'être*. We must ensure that the Kingdom of God, in us and around us, is always the priority to be sought and kept alive in our communities and missions. This seems self-evident but, as we know, in times of crisis psychosis derails even the most lucid minds. Fear paralyzes us, and the tendency is to do what everyone else is doing, even if it means forgetting the original intuition.

We have to adapt to the world. No one doubts that. In fact, we like to say that we are - or rather, we must be - men of our time. But what does it mean to be a man or woman of our time? That the complexity of the current situation does not lead us astray, taking the left today and the right tomorrow, because that would be the movement of our time. In what way are the choices that “our time” is in the process of making are motivated? Some governments are

¹⁴ Second letter to the novice master on “The coming of God’s Kingdom around us” (S.W. pp. 123-126).

taking selfish measures, no doubt to protect themselves. Let it not be so for us. Blessed are those whose choices are motivated by the search for the Kingdom of God and its justice!

Our vocation and mission are treasures we carry in clay jars (2 Corinthians 4:7). Often, when times are hard, we lose our bearings and, in the confusion, we tend to do as others do. But what determines the behavior of others? How can we make irrevocable or permanent choices in a time of crisis? Christoph Theobald tells us that this requires real spiritual work. He puts it this way: *“Making irrevocable choices today requires real spiritual work. Our postmodern societies tend to make all options provisional, and to suggest that we can constantly reset our counter to zero. We must remember, however, that maintaining irrevocable choices in one's existence and gradually establishing an orientation are the sine qua non of true maturation”*.¹⁵ In many cases, maturity is assessed on the basis of an individual's choices and fidelity to those choices. *Thy Kingdom come* is our vocation, it's our mission, and it's an admirable one. Blessed are those who make the Kingdom of God even more desirable today.

II.4. Caring for the Lay-Religious Alliance

It's impossible for me to finish this section on the call to “care” without mentioning the Lay-Religious Alliance. The impression I had during the General Chapter was that this Alliance was like a “breath of the Spirit” on our assembly. So we must take care of it. It's already a fine tradition: the first week of the General Chapter is spent “in Alliance”, and it was with great satisfaction that we experienced this week.

¹⁵ Christoph Theobald, *Vous avez dit vocation?*, Bayard, 2010, p.175

The awareness of the importance of the Lay-Religious Alliance for the entire Assumptionist body grew. It was everyone's wish to see this reality take another step forward. And we can already see this intention expressed in the acts of the Provincial and Vice-Provincial Chapters. I am delighted.

Nevertheless, on this point, we need to redouble our efforts. The reality of Assumptionist fraternity in the Alliance may be undergoing the same shocks as those mentioned above. The groups are not getting any younger; fatigue is setting in; but also, sometimes, relationships are no longer as warm as they were at the beginning. How can we revitalize this Alliance for Life and Mission, where it deserves special attention? I'd like to take this opportunity to thank those who are staying the course despite the turbulence.

During the Chapter, we recognized that the fraternity already being lived out in the Alliance was a sign of the synodality to which we are called. So let's remain open to discovering new paths along which the laity can lead us. We've already said it several times: in some entities, it's the laity who have preceded the religious. And today we give thanks for the results of mission in these lands.

Our joyful fraternity is one of the “privileged places” for witnessing the closeness of the Kingdom. A Lay-Religious Alliance lived in the hope of the Gospel becomes a sign, and I feel the words of Lucien Deiss echoing in me, as we sing: *“Ah, how beautiful on the mountain are the footsteps of those who carry the Good News, who announce salvation and peace. Who announce salvation and peace.”* This is my dream for the Alliance.

The Alliance is also a place of mutual enrichment. Today, our charism, which is a gift of God to the Church, *“is received, lived and enriched by the laity who walk with us in a synodal approach, the foundation of the Alzonian fraternity.”* (34th General Chapter

n. 27). We thank God for this. In this respect, I'd like to take up Pope Francis' call to the participants in a congress organized by the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life:

“Indeed, the path God is pointing out to the Church is precisely that of living communion and walking together more intensely and concretely. He is inviting us to go beyond autonomous ways of acting or parallel paths that never meet: clergy separated from laity, consecrated persons separated from clergy and faithful, the intellectual faith of certain elites separated from the popular faith, the Roman Curia separated from the particular Churches, bishops separated from priests, young people separated from the elderly, spouses and families little involved in the life of communities, charismatic movements separated from parishes, etc.

This is the most serious temptation at the moment. We still have a long way to go if the Church is to live as a body, as a true People, united by the one faith in Christ the Savior, animated by the same sanctifying Spirit and oriented towards the same mission of proclaiming the merciful love of God the Father.”¹⁶

To live this path together, you need certain provisions. They are indispensable. Good wishes are not enough, and this requires some conversions. So I'd now like to highlight some attitudes that I consider fundamental for our family, because the reality we're going through obliges us to do so. There's nothing new here. But it's worth repeating them here.

¹⁶ Address by the Holy Father to the participants of the Congress for Presidents and Referents of Episcopal Commissions for the Laity "Pastors and lay faithful called to walk together", February 18, 2023.

III. THE ESSENTIAL STEPS FOR WALKING TOGETHER IN THE SYNODAL SPIRIT

Is it possible to talk and walk in the synodal spirit without first mentioning a few prerequisites? The “conversation in the Spirit” method used during the first part of the Synod on Synodality in October 2023 emphasized the need to consider the Holy Spirit as the real protagonist in the exchanges. We read in the summary report that the experience was generally a good one: *“The experience of conversation in the Holy Spirit was enriching for all participants. In particular, we appreciated the way in which this style of communication encourages freedom in the expression of each point of view and mutual listening. It avoids a debate based too quickly on the repetition of personal arguments, leaving no time or place to become aware of the other's reasoning.”*¹⁷

On the other hand, it should be noted that this method has met with some resistance from those who are not used to it. This resistance is certainly due to the absence of a few prerequisites, which I'd like to mention now. These are: humility, trust, listening-discernment and the search for unity. At Assumption, we need to work on these prerequisites personally and as a community. Re-learning to give the Holy Spirit his place because it is He who has brought us together and sent us- must become our daily work.

III.1. Humility

“And all of you, clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another.” (1 Peter 5:5)

¹⁷ Summary Report, chapter 15, letter a, October 28, 2023.

So as not to lose myself in the many considerations from which the question of humility can be approached, I've taken the option of considering this definition which, even if it may not be the most authoritative in all contexts, crystallizes the appeal I'd like to make: *“Humility does not consist primarily in attitudes to be adopted: it expresses a way of being and of situating oneself, the way in which man considers himself in the position he assumes at the heart of the world and in front of God. Its dimension is anthropological; it modulates itself according to the orientation of the person who lives it and the context in which he or she is integrated.”*¹⁸

As we move forward as a congregation, as we carry out our mission and as we live our lives, we should keep returning to the question “Who am I really?” This question brings us face to face with ourselves, with others and with God. The sincerity with which we answer this question can significantly reduce the gap that sometimes exists between who we really are and what we think of ourselves, and also between our observable behavior and the image we want to give of ourselves through speeches.

It's impressive to see how often number 8 of our *Rule of Life* (“*We accept that we are different...*”) appears in the files that arrive here in Rome for the admission to perpetual vows and presentation to the diaconate or presbyterate. In the meantime, we are witnessing tensions in our communities linked precisely to this gap between rhetoric and reality concerning the content of this issue of our *Rule of Life*. And yet, it's an enriching experience when life is transformed by the encounter with new ways of doing and thinking. *“Respect and humility are fundamental attitudes for recognizing that we complement each other and that encounters*

¹⁸ Mongillo D., *Humilité, Dictionnaire de la vie spirituelle*, Cerf, 1983, p. 521.

*with different cultures can enrich the life and faith of Christian communities.”*¹⁹

A sincere look should start with ourselves. It is perhaps the false ideas and images we have of ourselves that distort our relationship with others and with God. St. Augustine, in an answer to a young man (Dioscorus) who asked him how to grow in our relationship with God, gave this well-known advice: *“If you ask me what is most essential in the religion and discipline of Jesus Christ, I will answer: first, humility, second, humility and third, humility.”*²⁰

At the level of our Congregation, I don't know if there is a single Province that is truly autonomous in everything. We need each other. In our desire to walk together as a body, we need to be humble in our exchanges of experience and expertise. It's a virtue that should accompany us in everything, life and mission. Humility is so important that our founder considered it fundamental for every Assumptionist religious: *“Of all the virtues, humility is surely the most indispensable to an Assumptionist religious.”* (S.W. p. 28)

May we all be protagonists in the life and mission of our Church! This is the call of Pope Francis. Of course, we will always have the valuable contribution of experts in certain subjects or areas of our lives, but the place of “non-experts” is also important. Sometimes, it's only late in life that we discover these non-experts have something to contribute. They may be experts in areas that we don't consider essential. To give everyone their place as protagonists a protagonist on the path of the Church and our religious family, we need to relearn how to listen.

¹⁹ *Summary Report, chapter 5, letter e.*

²⁰ Cf. Saint Augustine, Letter 118, 22.

III.2. Listening and Discernment

Listening can be a gift. But it's also an art that can be learned. In life, we all have the experience of having had the grace to talk to someone who really listens to us, and that's something that's priceless. But also, as religious people, we've had the experience of taking part in meetings where the participants seem to have come to take part in a competition, waiting to see who will win or which group will dominate. Can you imagine the spirit with which we listen to each other in a meeting where the objective is to emerge “victorious” from a discussion?

“He who speaks sows, he who listens reaps”. This phrase, attributed to Pythagoras, underlines the importance of attentive listening, which leads to personal enrichment. It's true that the possibility of being transformed by attentive listening is undeniable. But we have also experienced the difficulty of listening deeply when we feel our fears are about to be touched. The fear of listening to a hurtful yet useful truth, the fear of being called to order, the fear of losing our self-esteem even though it's based on an illusion.

Obviously, it's humility that should normally predispose us to listening, a balanced self-awareness that reminds us of what we really are: needy but also beloved of God. Ripening the “Yes” to the Lord and turning away from “idols” is done in an attitude of humility that makes us say: “Yes, I recognize my sin, I recognize my limitations.”

Listening calls on the discernment inspired by the Holy Spirit. It is this discernment that enables us to act according to the demands of the Kingdom, which is a gift and a task for humanity. There are many voices around us. From the “masters” who ask to follow them here and there. We need to discern because, as we all know, man is always called upon to discern.

The complexity of the situations facing the world and the Church increasingly compels us to enter into a process of listening and discernment. As Assumptionists, we want to proclaim the hope of the Gospel at the heart of a daily existence made up of thoughts that are sometimes contradictory, feelings that are sometimes mixed and incoherent, relationships with others that are sometimes difficult, and so on. How can we listen and discern in this context? If we add to this the persistent obstacles linked to personal behavior and structures (which may grant favors to certain categories of people), then the obligation to relearn “listening for discernment” cannot be put off. The idea of meeting and discussing in community the prejudices and stereotypes that stand in the way of our walking together is a good one. But here too, certain fears come between the brothers. For example, the fear of having to commit to a new lifestyle and behavior.

We find a fine example of a community walking together in listening to the Spirit in the Book of Acts. *“One day while they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said to them, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” So, after fasting and praying, and laying hands on them, they let them go.”* (Acts 13:2-3)

The passage illustrates the action of the Holy Spirit, who accompanies those gathered in the name of the Lord. Most importantly, when a community (local church or religious congregation), following the example of Antioch, is united and allows itself to be led, in listening and discernment, by the Spirit of God, it becomes more fruitful in its life and mission. Let us be guided by the Spirit. It is this Spirit who knows what kind of life and mission is needed in today's world. Let us continue our journey in trust, listening to each other, because this Spirit is free and speaks through whomever it wants, whenever it wants, however and wherever it wants.

III.3. The Trust

Stephen M. R. Covey may be right when he calls trust “*the one factor that changes everything*”. There is something common to every individual, relationship, group, organization, nation and civilization in the world. That something is trust, says Stephen Covey²¹. And, according to him, experience shows that if this trust disappears, even the most powerful government, the most successful company, and the strongest leadership, cannot withstand the fall.

These are difficult times. Organizations and institutions that have enjoyed a positive reputation for many years, even centuries, are in crisis. We began this letter by outlining this reality. This crisis situation explains, in good part, why there is a certain gradual weakening of trust. With the sexual abuse crisis facing our beloved Mother Church, it's not surprising that certain practices are changing. In some churches, for example, confessionals are required to be completely transparent, so that the outside world can see what goes on inside.

The consequences of a lack of trust are many: there are hidden tensions; rivalries between groups whose thinking is guided by the quest for victory (traditionalists versus progressives...); communication becomes defensive; decisions are suspect and the wildest rumors emerge. During the Covid-19 pandemic, we were all somewhat suspicious.

It was increasingly difficult to put ourselves in the hands of others, to trust the experts and to take risks.

²¹ Stephen M. R. Covey, *El factor Confianza. El valor que lo cambia todo*, Paidós, 2011, p.23. (Original title in English: *The speed of Trust*, 2006).

The 34th General Chapter presented to us a challenge: the challenge of trust. This trust is necessary, and we know that, depending on people and circumstances, its level can be low or high, and effectiveness depends on it enormously. Since we want to continue our journey as a Congregation, the big question is how, in each of our encounters - personal, community or intra-Congregational - we are going to inspire in ourselves, through our words and actions, a trust that is truly enriching.

Those who have lived in international communities will be delighted to know that this experience is often put on the list of “best practices”. But they know the price to pay for building trust between brothers. The delay, difficulty and sometimes impossibility of this process have repercussions on life and mission. Interculturality, as we have discussed on several occasions, is still more of a desired process than a lived one for many religious. Ideally, everyone should feel at home in every community. Because, as Chris Lowney says, this could make missionary passion even more attractive. When people see the whole world as home, they can look with confidence, interest and optimism at new ideas, cultures, places and opportunities.²² What a waste of energy we expend, simply by not trusting!

Trust does not exclude vigilance, as the saying goes. Of course, I'm not asking you to be naïve. In fact, naïve trust has been at the root of certain abuses that we now regret. Unfortunately, when times are tough, trust is an attitude reserved for the boldest. That's why I insist on it. Let's make it an Assumptionist characteristic for these new times. Being a man of our time also means being attentive to the signs of God, for it is He who guides history.

²² Cf. Chris Lowney, *El Liderazgo al estilo de Los jesuitas*, Ed. Norma, 2004, p. 337.

The participants in the 34th General Chapter were convinced that the Kingdom of God we want to proclaim is already in our midst. For each theme, we began by contemplating the signs of the Kingdom in our midst. Let's not forget that. One of my deepest convictions is that the Assumption is a work of God. The great achievements that have resulted from the “little sowings” of some and others in the course of history are not to be seen as the results of purely human expertise, but rather as proof of God's action. And we firmly believe it: what He was in the past, He is today and will be tomorrow. This is the key to increasing our trust in God, in others and in ourselves.

Let's pull out the “weeds” of mistrust, suspicion and rivalry, and embrace the culture of trust. This trust will strengthen our unity and make us even more effective Kingdomworkers. Unfortunately, these “weeds” abound in our communities. Fr. d'Alzon, in an instruction given to the Religious of the Assumption and later repeated for the Oblates, drew our sisters' attention to this issue, and it applies to us today if we want our power of action as workers for the Kingdom to be doubled:

“When they wanted to build a church on the mountains next to Nîmes, they had to import cement from Rome because the wind is so strong that walls constructed with local cement would have crumbled. If in the Holy Church there are buildings that are exposed to the fury of Satan, it is definitely the convents of religious men and women. What is needed is an extremely strong hold out against these attacks. This requires the cement of unity and of charity. Be united in your spirit and in your work, and you will double your effectiveness.”²³

Perhaps one last point on this aspect, and it's more of a question: is it possible to inspire trust? In other words: how can we develop

²³ S.W. p. 651.

trust between us? There are surely many elements to consider in this respect. But let me highlight just one for the moment. It's all about goodwill. One of the most effective ingredients for gaining or regaining trust is undoubtedly goodwill. This means *sincerely* wishing the other person well, and showing it. This can be seen when there's a certain consistency between what we say and what we do, which, despite the difficulties that arise, endures. As you can see, it's not just a question of asking others for trust, but also of offering it. And so mutual trust will be the flame of our fraternity in life and mission.

IV. ZAREPATH'S WIDOW: A PARADIGM ?

The story of the encounter between the prophet Elijah and the widow of Zarephath can serve as a basis for developing certain attitudes, but also for growing in faith in God, especially in His Providence. Admittedly, our situation is not yet comparable to that of the prophet Elijah, who had to flee from King Acab to save his life, or to that of the widow of Zarephath, who was left with only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a vase - her last meal. But this account from 1st Book of Kings is stimulating:

“07 After a while, not a drop of rain fell in the whole country, and the stream from which the prophet drank eventually dried up. 08 Then the word of the Lord came to him: 09 “Arise, go to Zarephath in the land of Sidon; you will live there; there is a widow there whom I have appointed to feed you. “10 The prophet Elijah set out for Zarephath, and reached the entrance to the town. A widow was gathering wood; he called to her and said, “Will you draw me, with your pitcher, a little water that I may drink?” 11 She went to draw some. Again he said to her, “Bring me a piece of bread too.” 12 She replied, “I swear by the life of the Lord your God: I have no bread. I only have a handful of flour in a jar, and a little oil in a vase. I pick up two pieces of wood and go home to prepare what's left for me and my son. We'll eat it, and then we'll die.” 13 Then Elijah said to her, “Don't be afraid, go, do as you've said. But first bake me a little wafer and bring it to me; then you can make some for yourself and your son. 14 For thus says the Lord, God of Israel: Jar of flour shall not fail, vessel of oil shall not be emptied, until the day the Lord gives rain to water the earth.” 15 The woman went and did as Elijah had asked, and for a long time the prophet, herself and her son had food. 16 And the jar of flour did

not run out, and the jar of oil did not run dry, as the Lord had announced it through Elijah.” (1Kings 17:7- 16).²⁴

IV.1. Temptations in times of crisis

One of the characteristics of a crisis is that it can plunge us into a certain panic. It's like being at a turning point where there are no alternatives. The moment is decisive and we are paralyzed. Initially, the prophet Elijah was sent to a place by the stream where he could drink and a bird could provide him with bread. But alas, as the drought persisted, the torrent dried up. So Elijah was sent to Zarephath, where he was to be cared for by a widow, a foreigner. How can we not think that this is the end? But Elijah could dare, because he had experienced what God is capable of doing. (The ravens brought him food...)

The widow of Zarephath is also in a dramatic situation. She who must save the prophet has nothing. All she has is what's left for a last meal before she dies. Yes, existential anguish easily plunges us into defeatism: *“I swear by the life of the Lord your God: I have no bread. I only have a handful of flour in a jar, and a little oil in a vase. I pick up two pieces of wood and go home to prepare what's left for me and my son. We'll eat it, and then we'll die.”*

Our founder Fr. Emmanuel d'Alzon experienced some difficult times in his life. The life of faith is full of the unexpected. In the “Cahiers du Bicentenaire D'Alzon 2010” series, the members of the General Council at the time had the good idea of reflecting on what they called the *“Turning Points in Emmanuel d'Alzon's Way of Holiness”*. The years 1852-1858 were very moving for our founder, on almost every level (physical health, financial problems at

²⁴ The French translation is that of the AELF (Liturgy Bishops' Association for French-speaking countries).

Collège de l'Assomption, stagnating numbers of religious...). Just to give you an idea of his anguish, here's what he says in a letter to Germer-Durand: *“My dear friend, I have reached the end of the battle, and I am not the victor. I was counting on one last support, and on arriving here I find a letter that takes away all hope. God must be willing, for it seems to me that I can bear witness to having fought until the last moment.”*²⁵ We are accustomed to sharing our founder's words about his passion for the Kingdom of God, his firm faith and his calls to holiness and perfection. But he also lived through some very difficult times, with the temptation to give up, to resign. However, as we know, these difficult moments turned into experiences that led him to a “spiritual conversion”. He understood that, ultimately, it was God who was driving his work.

A brother once asked me how I saw the future of the Congregation. The rest of our conversation led me to understand that this brother was in a sort of nostalgia for the Congregation's glorious past, when we still had “great intellectuals” like Georges Tavard (ecumenism & spirituality), Bruno Chenu (ecclesiology & ecumenism), Goulven Madec (Saint Augustine), etc. Yes, we give thanks to God for what they achieved as workers for the Kingdom, but I'm also convinced that the next generation will have to do the same. Yes, we give thanks to God for what they achieved as workers for the Kingdom, but I'm also convinced that the current generation can likewise - certainly in other ways - make the current page of our Congregation's history glorious. There's no reason to be pessimistic.

IV.2. The widow of Zarephath: poor but generous

It's true that the impression of a certain poverty in financial terms and in terms of qualified personnel to meet the needs of our major

²⁵ Letter to Eugène Germer-Durand, July 1, 1857.

works - such as Bayard and in our educational works, especially at university level - can be frightening. We've already started thinking about this issue at the General Council level. In fact, it's nothing new, and it was also a concern of my predecessors. But what can we do to ensure that we don't remain forever on pious hopes?

St. Augustine interprets the widow of Zarephath's gesture beautifully when he says that she thought she was looking for wood to prepare her last meal, but instead she had found new life. And Saint Augustine interprets what happened to the widow not as a gift, but as a sign:

“She had gone out to bake herself some bread, and she was gathering two pieces of wood, when Elijah spotted her. The moment the man of God saw her was when she was looking for two pieces of wood. This woman was the figure of the Church. And because the cross is made of two pieces of wood, this woman who was about to die was looking for that which would, forever, make her live.”²⁶

The call to “join forces” is being made in all sectors. At the level of the universal Church as well as in the congregations, this call is becoming increasingly urgent. At the level of our Congregation, the call has been formulated in terms of “mutualization of means.” We need to agree on what this means. We need to come to an agreement on what this means, so that we have the same understanding and, above all, get into the spirit behind it. We must not see this mutualization as a last resort, because there's no other alternative, but as a fundamental intuition that brings us back to where we were before. What we can't do alone, we must do together.

²⁶ Saint Augustine, Sermon 11 (translation by André Bouissou from the series "Sermons on Scripture, I).

“What could be happier than this poverty?” Again, our patriarch exclaims. Yes, a poverty that doesn't lock us into ourselves for fear of dying is a happy poverty. The initiatives taken in the past, which have led to a new awareness of the need to pool our human and material resources, must be doubly appreciated: on the one hand, there were ideas, and on the other, brothers of good will who believed in these ideas. Progress has been made. We thank God for that. But we must continue our efforts to mobilize even more concretely. My predecessor, Fr. Benoît Grière, was already calling us to this in the preface to the proceedings of the 33^e General Chapter in 2017: *“Co-responsibility, subsidiarity and mutualization will only be possible if everyone is committed to living catholicity to the full. It's a question of breaking down the particularisms that enclose and reject diversity.”*

We'll have to keep coming back to humility as a fundamental virtue, especially in these times of crisis. We are all poor in something. It's an important attitude, because the poor don't give of their superfluities, but do so as a gesture of love. As we all know, the way we give is worth more than what we give! So let's become poor, or perhaps better still, let's recognize that we are poor, so that our giving is a gesture of love that will help us advance in the four calls of the 34th General Chapter: fraternity, mission, formation and holiness.

IV.3. Risk gestures of love and faith

In this last point, I'd like, in short paragraphs, to list a few aspects or situations where we're called upon to intensify our efforts. Once again, nothing is new; but the fact of coming back to them underlines some concerns and the desire to remedy them in order to dare to move forward, because this is fundamental. Obviously, it's with the hat of a trainer (a former novice master), but also with my duty of vigilance as Superior General, that I have chosen these points among many others.

Risking a gesture of love for Jesus Christ. “For the love of Christ and to extend his Kingdom, I...”: this part of the profession formula is fundamental. Everything should begin here and end here. So you can easily understand why the first question, in the form proposed in the *Ratio Institutionis* for the evaluation of a novice in view of his commitment to religious life, is: “*Is Christ at the center of his life?*” What gesture of love have I risked that expresses this desire to put Christ at the center of my life?

Many idols have taken their place at the wheel of our lives. Sometimes we're aware of them, sometimes we're not. As master of novices, I often told young people that the very purpose of training is to help us identify these idols and free ourselves from them. Only after this process can we say that we are prepared for life and mission as disciples of our Lord. “*If you remain faithful to my word, you are truly my disciples; then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*”²⁷ In this passage, Jesus is speaking to the Jews who believed in him. I can only imagine that Jesus was then calling them to follow him, and he knew that these people needed help to become true disciples. And, according to Jesus, the help consisted in exposing them to the *Truth*, which was none other than Himself.

Risk a gesture of love for the Church: Needless to say, the call to risk a gesture of love for Mother Church is more pressing today than ever. You may be familiar with the contents of Saint Augustine's letter 243. This example may suffice to remind us of some of the reasons why we should renew our love for the Church and risk gestures of love for her. Letter 243 is St. Augustine's response to someone who had seen his determination to remain in the monastery diminish, because of the difficult situations his family (especially his mother) was going through. Augustine reminded him of a truth

²⁷ Jn 8:31-33.

that this young man seemed to ignore: “*The Church, our mother, is also your mother's mother. It is she who conceived you from Christ, she who bore you with the blood of martyrs, she who brought you into the world for eternal light, she who nourished you and still nourishes you with the milk of faith...*”.

Three things emerge from Augustine's response: the Church is our mother, the Church is also going through difficult times, and the Church needs us. Why not ask ourselves how and by what gesture we might be disciples of Fr. d'Alzon, affirming with him: “*The love of the Church, the defense of its rights, the study of its teaching, the sanctity of its members, and the extension of its influence, that is my goal, because by dedicating myself to the Church, I am dedicating myself to the preeminent work of Jesus Christ.*”²⁸ We are the sons and heirs of a founder who loved the Church with all his heart.

We may not be able to make spectacular gestures to express our love for Mother Church. But a seemingly banal gesture, such as intentionally refusing to post messages on social networks that are clearly part of a campaign to denigrate the Church, is also a gesture of love.

Risking a gesture of love for my Congregation. We've talked about the sense of belonging to the Congregation. I'll let you in on a secret: if you want to please me, simply say, “*I love the Assumption, I love my Congregation.*” Every time I see this in requests and self-assessments from brothers, I'm delighted. And I pray that it's true. “*God grant that it may last.*”²⁹

²⁸ S.W. p. 540.

²⁹ In a letter to Mother Marie-Eugénie de Jésus (March 27, 1861), Fr. d'Alzon speaks of the especially spiritual progress that many of the

In a homily, Pope Francis asked himself a question and answered it himself, saying: “*If someone were to ask me: What do you see as the diversion that threatens Christians today and always? What do you think would be the most dangerous diversion for Christians? I would definitely say: the lack of a sense of belonging to a people.*”³⁰ Analogously, perhaps this is also the diversion that threatens us as Assumptionists. What is the level of my sense of belonging to my Congregation, a Congregation with a history, a charism, a mission? How do I feel involved in its projects and integrated among its members? The crisis of the sense of belonging is very dangerous.

Our wish is that this level of belonging to the Assumption should be higher and higher. But let's not forget that this means a commitment. A gesture of love that we can make for our Congregation would be to commit ourselves each, in deed and word, to making our brothers feel respected and welcomed, so that their sense of belonging grows. Not only their belonging to the Congregation, but also to the family of the People of God. I pray that, in the days to come, the phrase “*This brother loves the Assumption*” will be the one most mentioned in the various reports arriving in Rome. Anything is possible if we dare to make gestures of love for our family, for example, by expressing our availability for the various missions of our Congregation.

Am I ready to risk a gesture of love and faith, like the widow of Zarephath?

sisters (Assumption Sisters of Bordeaux) have made in their lives. D'Alzon is pleased and says, “*God grant that it may last!*”

³⁰ Pope Francis' homily in the chapel of Saint Martha's House, Thursday, May 7, 2020.

CONCLUSION

If you ask me to sum up this letter and what prompted me to write it, I can simply quote the words of our patriarch Saint Augustine: *“Times are bad, times are hard, people say. Let us live well, and the times will be good.”* (Sermons 80, 8). In this sermon, St. Augustine commented on a passage from Matthew's Gospel in which Jesus reproaches his disciples for their lack of faith. *“Then the disciples came to Jesus and said to him in particular: ‘For what reason did we not succeed in expelling him?’ Jesus replied, ‘Because of your lack of faith. Amen, I say to you: if you have faith as big as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Carry yourself from here to there’, and it will carry itself; nothing will be impossible for you.’”* (Matthew 17:19-20)

The few visits I've made and the personal meetings I've had - in particular with the heads of some of the territorial entities of our Congregation - are proof enough that it would be a delusion to believe that there are no serious concerns that should preoccupy us. This is what I wanted to express in this letter. But at the same time, I want to keep a healthy distance, so as not to fall into either excessive alarmism or naive optimism. I am not capable of predicting the future but, I'm a man of faith, aware of our reality.

I've been taking part in meetings of Superiors General here in Rome, where the call to “walk together” is being felt as one of the obligatory ways of facing up to the challenges before us. If we seem to be in agreement, discussions and proposals around the question “What does it mean to walk together?” continue. Without pretending to answer this important question, I wanted to use this letter to encourage us to seek out the conditions that make this “walking together” possible. A certain conversion is required in our way of being and doing, and this is perhaps what Saint

Augustine exhorts us to do: “*Let us live well, and the times will be good.*”

I hope you have not read this letter as a scientific article presenting a thesis on a topical subject, but rather as the message of a companion in the life and mission of following Christ. I know that you are still at the beginning of implementing the orientations of the 34th General Chapter of our Congregation. Let us be led by the Spirit. The dynamism of Christian life in general, and religious life in particular, comes from the Holy Spirit. In the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, we see just how the Holy Spirit is at work in the high points of mission.

During the Mass of February 2, 2022, during the celebration of the 26th World Day of Consecrated Life, Pope Francis, exhorting consecrated persons to be attentive “*to the inner motions of the Spirit*”, had asked this question with which I end this letter: “*So, let us ask ourselves: by whom do we mainly let ourselves be moved: by the Holy Spirit or by the spirit of the world?*”³¹

³¹ Homily by Pope Francis on the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, St Peter’s Basilica, Rome, February 2, 2022.

*“O Jesus, you call us,
To form one body,
To remain ever faithful,
All united in our efforts.
May nothing ever separate
those who want to serve you,
But may your love take hold
of our hearts to unite them.”³²*

Fr. Ngoa Ya Tshihemba, a.a.
General Superior

May 19, 2024,
Solemnity of Pentecost

³² In *Ensemble. Recueil œcuménique de chants et prières*, Bayard, 2002.
Song : O Jésus, tu nous appelles. Text by Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf.

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