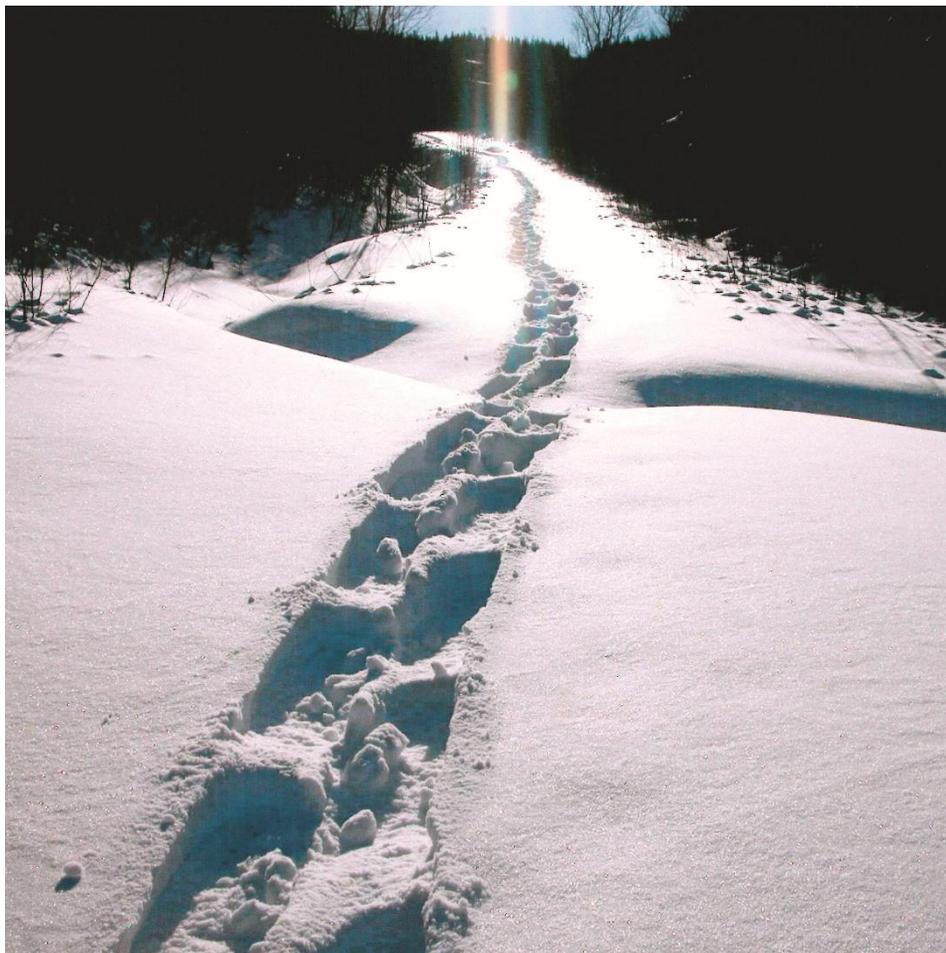


“Make your way by going farther”



**Letter #5 to the Congregation
on the implementation of the 33rd General Chapter**

“Make your way by going farther.”¹

Dear Brothers, dear friends of the Assumption,

The 33rd general chapter is disappearing further and further from sight; it’s already been seven months since we celebrated it. I am writing this letter in order to get us back on track. We are only at the beginning of the road and we have six years before us to achieve our goals.

The Acts of the general chapter are a viaticum, that is to say, food for the journey. They must provide us with substantial nourishment so that we may move forward firmly and decisively. “*New wine into fresh wineskins. So that Jesus Christ may be proclaimed to the men and women of our day*”. I would like to develop two attitudes with you that in my mind need to be encouraged so that our moving forward may be characterized by the joy of the gospel and that our missionary dynamism may be strengthened.

A people on the go

First of all, it seems to me that it would be useful to develop an **Exodus spirituality**. The Exodus was a going out, that is a departure from the house of slavery toward the Promised Land. We are a people on the way, a people moving towards its liberation and seeking its homeland: the Kingdom of God. Going out, as Pope Francis has urged us, means going out to meet the other; it means going out to the peripheries of life. To do so, one must accept to leave behind one’s certitudes and one’s tranquility and to come face to face with

¹ Quotation from a poem by Antonio Machado, “Caminante no hay camino” (“Wayfarer, there is no path”).

the new things the Spirit wishes to work. God never stops speaking to the world today. We need only to listen.

The first going-out that we must undertake is the going out of ourselves. Jesus showed us by his incarnation that God himself went out, “I came forth from the Father and have come to the world” (Jn 16:28). God came to encounter our humanity and the feast of Christmas reminds us of this. It is this same movement that strengthens our resolve to go out of ourselves today. Going out to meet the other demands a real effort of openness to the unexpected. We must accept this way of proceeding in order to be configured to Christ. Too often believers remain comfortably settled in their certitudes. We have a hard time imagining budging, being called into question, or changing. Well, without this, life is impossible. Getting out of oneself means allowing oneself to be transformed by the encounter with others. It is urgent for us to put this movement into action if we wish to give life to our faith. The Assumption must engage in dialogue. We have said that we want to work for unity in a divided world; this will take place by openness to all. Learning how to dialogue in community, in one’s province, in the Church is vitally needed.

Going out is also eminently connected to our missionary dynamism. Going out of oneself means becoming an apostle, one sent to bring the Good News of salvation. Over the course of the coming years we must rediscover the apostolic flame developed by Emmanuel d’Alzon in his time.

The second going out has to do with the Church as a whole. We cannot remain enclosed in the warm tranquility of our institutions, venerable though they be. When Pope Francis said that “time is greater than space” (*Evangelii gaudium*, #222-225), he was reminding us that we are “to take a long-term approach to our work and not aim at immediate results”. To be faithful to this appeal, we are asked to move forward with clear alternatives and with tenacity.

Going off the beaten path in order to explore new terrains --- that's another way of being missionary.

The path we take is uncharted since it is in faith that we advance, step by step. It is often strewn with setbacks and obstacles, but we do not despair. We are not alone on the way. There are scouts, brothers who move more quickly than we do and who provide direction. I pray that we might listen to the prophets that God still sends us today to energize us and to invite us to move forward resolutely. Let us take a good look around our communities to identify the prophets --- the 'awakeners'— those who call us never to let up and always to pursue our efforts.

The Catholic Church is now living through, as has often been the case in her long history, a time of radical changes. There is much being called into question, much soul-searching; and at the same time the distance between us and our contemporaries keeps growing day by day. In the face of this “continental divide” — the continent of faith facing that of ignorance, indifference and unbelief — we must marshal our forces. But we can't settle for reproducing old solutions to address new challenges. We must come up with innovative proposals enlightened by the Spirit in the context of a communal discernment if we are to sustain the relevance of the gospel message. The chapter requested that we seek out new wineskins to contain the wine of the Kingdom. It is urgent that we set about looking for these new wineskins in order to quench the thirst of our contemporaries.

The Exodus spirituality entails an openness to what is new and wonder-filled. If God makes all things new, we are called to discover this newness in our everyday lives. The chapter laid out some important guidelines to assist our ministries in working for unity. We were asked to invest ourselves in the field of education. In whatever countries we are present I invite each province to find ways to translate this intuition of Fr. Emmanuel d'Alzon into action. Heavily involved in parishes, the Assumption must be driven by a strong

desire to offer a holistic education. Being an Exodus people means exploring new ways to promote this educational vision. How can we reach the poorest, those excluded by globalization, the forgotten ones of our societies? We can't settle for what already exists. The network of bush schools in the diocese of Tular is, in this regard, a beautiful example of Gospel concern for education in Madagascar. The religious who launched this initiative saw the misery of the local populations and sought ways to help them out of it. The idea of founding "schools under shade-trees" has allowed thousands of children to receive an education. Today this work continues and is growing. ISEAB (Institut Supérieur Emmanuel d'Alzon de Butembo/Emmanuel d'Alzon Institute of Higher Studies of Butembo) in the Congo was also a new project intended to offer young people from North Kivu a high-quality education. Our brothers in the Congo have managed to hang on and move forward in spite of the countless obstacles they've had to face in realizing their dream. Such initiatives must be encouraged. As God himself has done, we too must learn "to see the misery" of people so that we might help them to achieve greater dignity and greater happiness.

We are also called to be present on the "digital continent." The new means of social communication are arenas, as was the agora of Athens in St. Paul's day, calling for the proclamation of the Good News. We have to demonstrate inventiveness and initiative. In the 19th century the Assumption knew how to invest in the domain of the press and publications. Will we be able to invent new ways of reaching our contemporaries? The press, especially with Bayard, remains a priority for the entire congregation. Young religious must be prepared to enter the fields of communication and journalism. It is urgent that we establish our work of communication solidly in Africa, in Asia, in every land where it is possible.

The Exodus spirituality also means nourishing unwavering hope. We move forward by placing ourselves completely in the hands of God who watches over us and guides us by his Spirit.

Finally, if there were still a need to strengthen this Exodus spirituality at the Assumption, I would say we should look at a “missionary fervor,” as it is specified in *Evangelii gaudium* (E.G. #111).

“Evangelization is the task of the Church. The Church, as the agent of evangelization, is more than an organic and hierarchical institution; she is first and foremost a people advancing on its pilgrim way towards God. She is certainly a mystery rooted in the Trinity, yet she exists concretely in history as a people of pilgrims and evangelizers, transcending any institutional expression, however necessary”.

Our Assumptionist patrimony offers us a treasure in community life. It is urgent that we restore community to the heart of our attempt to live the Gospel. Community itself is the real missionary subject. “Apostolic community,” as we call it, is much more than the sum of the ministries undertaken by individuals, generous as they may be.

Live out the catholic spirit fully

The second attitude which seems important to me is the need to encourage and renew our commitment to **the catholic spirit**, that spirit which viscerally possessed our founder. It means being able to think, to discern, to act “with the whole in mind,” *kat’holon*, as it is said in Greek. Christians believe that the event that took place in Jesus Christ affects all of reality, all human beings and everything that is human. The catholic spirit teaches us to see far and wide and to conduct ourselves as members of a Body. This Body is greater than the sum of its parts. The text that might shed light and give us some guidance in understanding what I am recommending is the Second

Vatican Council's dogmatic constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium* :

“In virtue of this catholicity each individual part contributes through its special gifts to the good of the other parts and of the whole Church. Through the common sharing of gifts and through the common effort to attain fullness in unity, the whole and each of the parts receive increase.” (Lumen gentium, 13)

For several years our Congregation has been working on this theme. The 2005 general chapter chose as its theme, “Many gifts in one body...so that the world may believe”. Already what we were trying to do was make progress on this problematic of unity and diversity. The Lay-Religious Alliance has contributed to gains in this area of catholicity. By including lay members of the Assumption in our different activities and moments of reflection, we have made gains in the catholic spirit. Furthermore, the many collaborative efforts between provinces have been considerably strengthened. Finally, the creation of the Congregation's Plenary General Council has allowed us to foster a spirit that is ever more characterized by coresponsibility and solidarity.

The Assumption is an international and pluricultural body. Respect for diversity and resistance to the homogenization of cultures is needed more than ever. Let us begin to live this catholic spirit in community. I am thinking first of all of our international houses of formation. We have had the pleasure of officially constituting such communities in Kinshasa, Nairobi, Ouagadougou and Buenos-Aires. Other possibilities are currently under consideration; it is essential that we work to instill a catholic spirit in the formation of young religious. It is such a spirit that favors the welcome of the other and contributes to seeking the common good for the proclamation of the Gospel. Differing points of view can be fruitful and creative when they do not undermine the unity of the

whole. Let us all learn to live out that “university” so dear to St. Francis de Sales.

The catholic spirit contributes to shaping the *sensus fidelium*, that is not the fruit of some democratic process but the result of seriously paying attention to the Holy Spirit in fidelity to the Tradition.

The Assumption has a precious heritage that comes from our beloved founder, Fr. Emmanuel d’Alzon. A catholic sense was innate in him, in his bones, even if it featured a more confessional dimension in his day than it would take in ours. Let us rediscover our founder’s zeal to passionately live out catholicity today.

To think “according to the whole” means not limiting one’s outlook to one’s habitual living space. It means opening one’s eyes wide so as to be able always to go beyond one’s usual way of living and thinking. It thus means being faithful to the future, that is to say, being ready to respond generously to the demands of the times so that “Jesus Christ might be known and loved.”

Improving the catholic spirit will also take place at the Assumption as a result of theological studies. It seems urgent to me that we revitalize our investment in patristics, in spirituality, in history, in exegesis, in dogmatic theology, in liturgy, etc. I have a particular concern for specialized studies especially in ecumenism, Oriental studies, Islamology, etc. Already some young religious have broken the ice and we can hope that others will follow their example.

The catholic spirit brings us to the small and forgotten. We have a social spirit that links us in solidarity with all those who are suffering hard times. The authentic Catholic is committed to making the world more just and more fraternal. Concern for the planet has become urgent: it cannot be ignored.

Conclusion: walk with God!

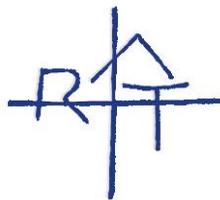
Finally, in concluding this letter that I wanted to be short so as not to weigh down a reflection that should give priority to the Acts of the Chapter themselves, I simply wanted to recall what is essential in guiding us: the Word of God. Growing in an Exodus spirituality and resolutely committing ourselves to living out a catholic spirit oblige us to frequent the Word of God daily. This can take place through a personal *lectio divina* but also by sharing with one's brothers.

Why not meditate on this passage from the prophet Micah?

“You have been told, O man, what is good, and what the LORD requires of you: Only to do justice and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

May we set out on the road that is opening before us and walk with our God!

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Superior general
Rome, December 18, 2017



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