

“HERE I AM, LORD; SEND ME!”

(Isaiah 6,8)



**Letter # 7 to the Congregation
on mission**

Cover illustration: The Risen Christ confirms Peter's mission (icon of the crypt of St. Peter in Gallicantu in Jerusalem, written by Evgeni Kisets, 1995).

“HERE I AM, LORD; SEND ME!”

(Isaiah 6,8)

**Letter # 7 to the Congregation
on mission**

« The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature, since it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she draws her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father. » (Ad gentes/On the Mission Activity of the Church, n°2)

INTRODUCTION

When Jesus encounters individuals on the way, he invites some of them to follow him. He calls them to be his apostles and his disciples. The Gospel records these vocational accounts. Along the shores of the Sea of Galilee Peter and Andrew encounter the man from Nazareth. Jesus addresses Peter and says to him, « Come and follow me ». Accompanying Jesus is an adventure that leads us on paths uncharted, but whose goal is the Kingdom of God. From the beginnings of the consecrated life, men and women have lived out their commitment by the religious vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity. We also, in our day, are called to follow the one who surrendered everything out of love. « Come and follow me ». Jesus continues to invite men and women today.

« “Leave...” for Abraham; « Follow me » for Peter; « Go!” for Moses; « Come...” for Nathaniel. One might say this God cannot be encountered except by those who are on the way, by the pilgrim who fully accepts his condition as *homo viator*, ready to leave things behind (...) in order to depart with him and live the time of Advent. »¹

¹ Léonard Amossou KATCHEKPELE, « Dieu est assez grand pour se défendre tout seul. L’apologie du témoin. » Lessius, 2018, p.44

At first I was thinking of addressing this letter to those brothers in formation, but as I was writing it I realized that it would be useful to address it to every religious. I hope that every brother might take it to heart in order to deepen the sense of mission at the Assumption. More than ever, it is critical that we renew our missionary zeal. Cardinal Lustiger, the former archbishop of Paris, would often say that Christianity was only at the beginning of its history. This is also my firm conviction. However, if we wish to contribute to the renewal of evangelization we must rediscover the sense of availability. Even if young people in formation constitute a particular group for whom preparation for mission must be a matter of priority, formation must not remain the exclusive affair of a few duly authorized formators. It is important that everyone be resolutely involved in passing on what he has received. The Assumption is a living body that exists only in the act of passing on that takes place from generation to generation. The charism we have received from Emmanuel d'Alzon is a gift for the Church. It is living and grows with every generation of Assumptionist religious. Our responsibility is great: how to assure our obligation of communicating the heart of our religious life to our younger brothers. We can't wait for this to be delegated to « someone else ». It is the life of each religious that serves as a witness and that allows young religious to learn the reality of Assumptionist religious life from within. Books, courses, conferences are all useful, but all of this is insufficient to constructing the Assumptionist 'personality.' If, unfortunately, it happens that we are unable « to pass on what we have received » (I Cor 15:3), the Assumption will then have seen its day.

But the mission isn't simply a matter of preparing brothers in formation. A sense of missionary urgency should concern us all, « If I preach the gospel, this is no reason for me to boast, for an obligation has been imposed on me, and woe to me if I do not preach it! », says the Apostle Paul (I Cor 9:16). Christianity in the

3rd millenium has a formidable task to make the message of life announced by Jesus Christ understood. In a world that is changing quickly and where the old reference points are disappearing, it is urgent that we bear witness to our faith in the God who saves. Assumption is an apostolic congregation. It is the heir of the mission of the apostles who received this charge from Christ, « Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature » (Mk 16:15). At a time when we are preparing to celebrate the 175th anniversary of our foundation, we must, in faithfulness to Emmanuel d'Alzon, rediscovers the apostolic zeal of our beginnings. I would like this letter to contribute to the missionary renewal of the Assumption. We have a very rich apostolic patrimony and, thanks be to God, we can count on a sizeable number of Assumptionist religious and lay associates to strengthen our presence in the world. Our missionary sites are numerous with our traditional apostolates (the media, education, parishes, missions, justice and peace, ecumenism, studies), but also with new terrains to be explored (the digital world, safeguarding the earth, solidarity with the neediest, with migrants, and with the displaced, ...). Will we be able to muster our forces in order to be present to these realities? I am convinced that we are at a turning-point for Christianity at an international level. If we rediscovers the zeal of our first communities, we will be capable of contributing to the transformation of the world by means of the Gospel. So we have conversions to undergo if we are to achieve a real missionary praxis. The exhortation of Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, is of primary importance for us. I will cite it several times. Therefore, the goal of this letter in the first place is to raise the awareness of Assumptionist religious and lay associates in order that they may be more and more imbued with a missionary spirit. The fundamental conviction is the absolute link that there is between *hearing the Word of God* and *proclaiming the Gospel*. Religious take their bearings in life from what they find

in the words of their master and Savior, Jesus Christ. However, these words they receive are not doomed to remain dead letters in the heart of the those who listen, for they are the power of salvation.

I. THE MISSION AT THE ASSUMPTION

1) The missionary spirit of Fr. Emmanuel d'Alzon

Emmanuel d'Alzon does not speak of mission in the singular; he favors the expression, « the missions ». Or else, he speak more readily of the goals of the congregation and lists the activities to which the Assumption should dedicate itself, the works that we are called to animate. Having said this, from the beginning of the foundation, it is clear that our founder designated « foreign missions » as an important activity of the congregation. [cf. « *Notes for a draft of the Constitutions 1849-1850* » (E.S. pp. 649, 656). And the *Instruction de 1873* (E.S. p.185) where Fr. d'Alzon speaks about the difficulties involved with the Australia mission and the first results of the one in Bulgaria.]

« Love of the Church stirs up another love in our hearts. The apostles were commissioned to preach Christ's message not only in Jerusalem but 'to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:8). Yes, our ambition extends also to foreign missions. It is such a providential grace to be given so many missionaries when we are still in fact not very numerous! But at the same time, look at the auxiliaries we have called upon to assist us. In the past, virgin women consecrated to the Lord were hidden behind very strict cloister walls. Today we are telling them: 'Daughters, you will go beyond the seas'. » (*Instruction de 1868*, E.S. p.144)

Emmanuel d'Alzon did not found a missionary institute as those many founded in the 19th century. He founded a religious congregation ready to obey the Pope in extending the Kingdom of God. This is what he was thinking of when he proposed the 4th vow. But d'Alzon had a concern for going beyond the frontiers of his homeland. If the development of the Assumption beyond these borders was, on the whole, limited, it was, first of all, because of a lack of workers for the mission.

2) The mission over time

The Assumption has experienced a real missionary zeal over the course of its history, even though it must be recalled that the internationalization of the congregation was, after all, chaotic. While we may have gone to Australia and to the Ottoman Empire during Fr. d'Alzon's lifetime, the years following the founder's death were characterized rather by numerous difficulties caused by anticlericalism in France and by expulsions. These 'earned' us the chance to leave France and go to Spain, Belgium, Italy, and England, but this was not the principal aim for the foundations in these countries. Rather, the idea was to prepare many religious to return to France when the time was once again favorable. One significant indication of this intention was the fact that the alumnae founded outside of France welcomed, for the most part, young Frenchmen. Still the diaspora that arose in this way (don't forget that the title of the Congregation's newsletter at the time was called « *Lettre à la dispersion* ») nevertheless favored the implantation of the Assumption outside of France. Let us also point out in this troubled period the foundation of Chile in South America (1890) and that of the U.S.A. in North America (1895) under François Picard. The generalate of Gervais Quenard was

characterized by a significant missionary expansion: the Congo (1929), Brazil (1935) and Mexico (1948) in Latin America, and Manchuria (1935). After him with the generalate of Fr. Wilfrid Dufault the missionary expansion continued with, among others, Ivory Coast and Madagascar, but it was also a time of contraction with the persecution in the Near East ('Mission d'Orient') and the arrival of independence in North Africa, which led to us leaving Tunisia and Algeria quite quickly.

Then came the era of Vatican II. The council brought an air of renewal, but both the new concept of the Church and the decree on religious freedom contributed to a slow-down of the mission *ad gentes*. The nosedive in the number of vocations also complicated the desire for new foundations. One missionary out of three in the world in 1960 was Dutch....

To a greater or lesser extent, there took root in the minds of religious and certain Christians the idea that human salvation did not necessarily mean conversion to Christianity. I name this period that of the « de-mission ». It was the triumph of the theory of immersing oneself where one's witness of life would take place in a manner that was silent and not explicit.

However, Pope Paul VI spared no efforts. His apostolic exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* is probably one of the most beautiful texts on missionary activity. Paul VI vigorously recalls that whoever receives the Gospel becomes *ipso facto* an evangelizer: « the person who has been evangelized goes on to evangelize others. Here lies the test of truth, the touchstone of evangelization: it is unthinkable that a person should accept the Word and give himself to the kingdom without becoming a person who bears witness to it and proclaims it in his turn. »²

² Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, December 8, 1975, n°24.

But this was a time of secularism and doubts. It was John Paul II who powerfully aroused the Church with the theme of the new evangelization and a text like *Redemptoris missio*, among others, that called to mind once again the role of the Church in the proclamation of salvation. The Church regained confidence in itself to reach out to new cultures. As for the Assumption she went from 1900 religious in 1960 to less than 1000 in the year 2000. Communities closed, novitiates were almost empty. We left Ivory Coast, but we gave new life to the adventure of the Near Eastern Mission after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Then a missionary dream came alive anew. A study group to consider a foundation in Asia was constituted in France during the provincialate of Fr. Claude Maréchal. The Congo undertook its first missionary initiative outside of the country by cooperating in the new foundation in Kenya launched by the USA and England (1988); later they lent a hand in the Tanzania adventure and finally in 1998 assumed responsibility for all the communities in East Africa. Assumption returned to Asia in 1991 with a foundation in Korea. Finally, beginning in the year 2000, tentative plans took shape to found in West Africa, the Philippines, and Vietnam.

It must be mentioned that we have experienced « an erosion of the missionary spirit » (Christoph Theobald, cf. p. 7). The withdrawal of Christians, the fear of impinging on the individual freedom of non-believers, and respect for diversity of thought are some possible factors that might explain the slowdown in missionary activity. It is likely that reflection on inter-religious dialogue and ecumenism were also factors favoring a new attitude and the rejection of proselytism.

3) The 33rd general chapter of 2017

The last chapter spent a long time discussing the question of mission at the Assumption. That should not be anything surprising since one of the essential roles of a capitular gathering is to define the apostolic priorities of the Congregation. However, the discussions brought to light that we don't all have the same concept of mission. Not only was there discussion on the priorities to be adopted but also on the meaning itself of the word 'mission.' For sure, the rift arose essentially because the word 'mission' also signifies the mission *ad extra*, that is to say, foreign missions. I think we have to clarify once again what we mean by mission, but especially to favor religious availability so that the Assumption may live out an authentic missionary dynamism. This may be developed within the limits of one's culture or homeland, but also beyond the frontiers of these. I find it relevant to cite a long passage from John Paul II's apostolic exhortation *Vita consecrata* to launch our reflection.

« In the image of Jesus, the beloved Son "whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world" (Jn 10:36), those whom God calls to follow him are also consecrated and sent into the world to imitate his example and to continue his mission. Fundamentally, this is true of every disciple. In a special way, however, it is true of those who, in the manner that characterizes the consecrated life, are called to follow Christ "more closely", and to make him the "all" of their lives. The task of *devoting themselves wholly to "mission"* is therefore included in their call; indeed, by the action of the Holy Spirit who is at the origin of every vocation and charism, consecrated life itself is a mission, as was the whole of Jesus' life. The profession of the evangelical counsels, which makes a person totally free for the service of the Gospel, is important also from this point of view. It can therefore be said that *a sense of mission is essential to every Institute*, not only those

dedicated to the active apostolic life, but also those dedicated to the contemplative life. »³

John-Paul II affirms unambiguously that religious life is by its very nature missionary. No one can escape this reality because our credibility is at stake. Without a spirit of mission, our life is void of meaning. But we know that mission is not simply a question of action, of doing, but it also consists in our way of being in the world through our religious consecration. The witness of our lives is manifested in the practice of our religious vows, but it leads immediately to the explicit proclamation of the salvation given in Jesus Christ. Our life is quite simply open to the world and cannot rest satisfied with some kind of implicit proclamation. In this regard, the insistence that Pope John Paul II makes in speaking of the mission for contemplative institutes is an enlightening element. Even in the solitude of a monastery religious life is called to witness in the world in order to make the Kingdom grow. Religious life is not self-referential; it finds its meaning in relation to the world in which it lives and in its privileged communion with the Lord. It is an attentive listening to Word of God which makes of us ‘missionary-disciples’.

II. THE ‘MISSIONARY DISCIPLE’

For a renewal of missionary activity to take place, here and elsewhere, *ad intra* and *ad extra*, there are certain conditions to be satisfied. The Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* renews our reflection principally due to Pope Francis’ insistence on speaking of the ‘missionary-disciple.’ ». As for me, I would like to think that

³ John Paul II, Apostolic exhortation, *Vita consecrata*, 1996, n°72.

it is around this reflection on witness, which is dear to him, that we can deepen our own reflection.

1) The change in a paradigm

We are seeing a change in the concept of mission. The Church that emerged from the Second Vatican Council no longer poses as an absolute the old adage: « outside of the Church, no salvation ». Baptism still maintains its decisive role in filial adoption, but the conciliar texts suggest the possibility of salvation without it. The change in paradigm is also a new world-wide sociological reality. We are immersed in a secularized world or one on the way to becoming such. It is a post-religious world that is on the horizon. How is one to have a missionary spirit in this context?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) spent a lot of time reflecting on the possibility of faith in Jesus in a world that is no longer religious. Marked by the atrocities committed by the Nazis, Bonhoeffer remained faithful to the point of giving up his life. He was put death by hanging. The question that stayed with him was *How can Christ be the Lord of the non-religious?* It is a question of asking how the universal salvation given in Christ might reach those who are not religious. But as Joseph Moingt writes, « This question is in turn put to the reader; it is addressed to all Christians, an invitation to move from reflection to action, from thinking that is bold to action that is equally bold. How are we to proclaim the God of Jesus Christ in a world freed from religion?

I believe that the Assumption, by virtue of its solidarity with the common human condition, has something to contribute to the proclamation of the Good News to this world. Religious fraternity, the sense of forgiveness and reconciliation, internationality and interculturality, all of this bears witness to our faith in a reality

that goes beyond what can merely be seen by the eye. Nevertheless, the new paradigm leads us also to throw off the vestiges of an enslaving and uncritical religion. This means that we must develop an adult faith, a faith that accepts to question things, but remains fundamentally attached to the presence of Christ in time and history. To be sure, this is demanding, but how are we to be worthy of faith if we maintain the old reflexes of an infantile religion? God is greater than our questions; we must surrender ourselves to him.

The Assumption is also experiencing a new paradigm with internationality and interculturality. Not long ago all missionaries came from countries where Christianity had been established for centuries. Missionaries lived out their mission as an epic of civilization—highly questioned today—that nurtured the conviction that what Christianity brought was not simply the message of salvation, but also human progress. All of this is the subject of much debate. Today the Assumption no longer has many vocations in the Western world; they are quite sparse. The troops that are available for the mission are African and Asian, but they are no longer animated by the same triumphant mindset. Here as well, adaptation to reality is necessary. Does this mean that it is not possible to be missionaries when one is the offspring of former countries of mission? Of course not, but it is necessary to undergo an ideological conversion in order to understand that announcing Christ in the modern secularized world is not a question of taking revenge on history.

The Assumption must live the values of universal brotherhood by already starting at home. So there is an urgent mission to be undertaken in nurturing not only internationality—this is taking place quite well— but in promoting interculturality. This is a decisive challenge, but solutions are not easily implemented.

Christoph Theobald, a Jesuit theologian, has recently written that « our current situation (...) cannot be described by the purely negative concept of *dechristianization* nor be addressed adequately in the framework of a strategy of *re-christianization*. To the contrary it is qualitatively unprecedented and it can only be compared in this sense, on a biblical plan, with the foundation of Christian communities emerging from paganism. »⁴

The change in the missionary model can be found, therefore, in the observation that there is no longer a Christian territory over against some kind of mission territory. The whole world is the object of the new evangelization, of the original proclamation of the Good News. « If the whole world is 'mission territory,' then the distinction between the life of the Church *ad intra* and its mission *ad extra* must be eliminated, in favor of a unique perspective of decentering that would define the life of the Church itself. Thus it was that the communities of the New Testament were founded and it is thus that there can be (re)born ecclesial communities oriented toward 'the other' and rooted in the work of the Holy Spirit already at work in the world'. »⁵ He further explains his thinking in adding, « How does Christ bring about his Kingdom with regard to those who do not acknowledge him?; and yet he does not say: How is it, but: How *can it become?* — something that implies our role, our future action in extending this Kingdom of Christ ». This poses a ton of questions regarding the place of the Church, its mission if it can no longer function as religion, etc.

Pope Francis insists a lot on the rejection of proselytism. In his most recent message (Pentecost 2019) for World Mission Sunday, for example, he said, « This divine life is not a product for

⁴ Christoph THEOBALD, « L'Europe, terre de mission », Cerf, 2019, p.89.

⁵ François ODINET, Nouvelle Revue Théologique, 141, (2019), p.492.

sale – we do not practise proselytism – but a treasure to be given, communicated and proclaimed: that is the meaning of mission. »⁶

We are called to give, communicate, and proclaim. We are disciple-missionaries.

2) Witness to the Risen Christ: the proclamation of the Kingdom of God

The Christian believes in the Resurrection of Jesus. This faith is founded on the witness of those who have gone before us and we have the duty of transmitting this faith. We, too, are witnesses. It is the Holy Spirit who makes witnesses and gives them the strength to carry out their witness to the end. He alone gives us ‘confidence’ (*fiducia*) to carry out this witness. If Peter wasn’t able to give an answer to the woman in the High Priest’s courtyard who asked if he knew the Nazorean, then the result was that he denied him three times. But once he was filled with the Holy Spirit, this same Spirit « enkindled his once frozen heart that he might bear witness to Christ and opened his once trembling mouth that had stifled the truth ».⁷

As it is written in *Evangelii gaudium*, we are « Spirit-filled evangelizers »: « At Pentecost, the Spirit made the apostles go forth from themselves and turned them into heralds of God’s wondrous deeds, capable of speaking to each person in his or her own language. The Holy Spirit also grants the courage to proclaim

⁶ “*Baptized and Sent: The Church of Christ on Mission in the World,*” *Message of His Holiness Francis for World Mission Day 2019, Pentecost, June 9, 2019*

⁷ Augustine of Hippo, Sermon on the Gospel of St. John, *tractatus XCII, 2, BA 74B, p.223.*

the newness of the Gospel with boldness (*parrhesía*) in every time and place, even when it meets with opposition. » (n°259)

It is good to reflect on the notion of « witness ». To do so, I will rely on the work of Jean-Claude Chrétien, a contemporary French philosopher, among others. He recalls that « even if the New Testament did not invent the word ‘witness’ (*martus*), nor its reality, it gave it meanings both new and decisive, that have left their profound and lasting imprint on how we understand this word and this act. »⁸ The author identifies the frequency and importance of the Greek terms signifying *a witness, the act of witnessing, or bearing witness* in the New Testament. « Proportionately and often absolutely, these words occur more frequently in the New Testament than in the Hebrew Scriptures, or the Old Testament, to use the terminology of Christians. And their meaning grows and is enriched without any perceptible rupture. But the times these terms occur are repeated very unequally in the various books. If one takes the word *martus* (a witness), *marturéō* (to bear witness) and *marturia* like *marturion* (the act of witnessing), (...) there are a little less than 170 occurrences. The share in the Synoptic gospels is quite modest in number, the share in the Johannine writings (Gospel, Letters, Book of Revelation) is considerable (77 occurrences), and what remains is distributed among the non-Johannine letters and the Acts of the Apostles. But this Johannine preponderance is somewhat surprising: the word ‘witness’ itself never appears in the Gospel of John (even if at times, translators do introduce it) whereas the verb ‘to witness’ and one of the words for ‘the act of bearing witness’ (*marturia*) abound. This accent on the act itself is worth pondering: John goes from the witnessing to the witness and not the other way around. » Fr. Ceslas Spicq makes an important

⁸ Jean-Louis CHRÉTIEN, « Neufs propositions sur le concept chrétien de témoignage », *Philosophie*, 2006, n°1, p.76.

observation, « the Biblical *martys* is not purely an eye-witness, simply present at something that happens; he is active, called to recount what he has seen and heard, to announce what he knows. The mission of the Twelve was to affirm Christ's resurrection. »⁹ The apostle Paul is the shining example of the witness; that is what Ananias tells him after the incident on the road from Damascus: « For you will be his witness before all to what you have seen and heard. » (Acts 22:15). The Apostle bears witness to Jesus and that is why St. John writes his Gospel and his Revelation. All missionary preaching is a *marturion* revealing the event of salvation.

« These missionary preachers were not satisfied with recounting the facts and gestures or the words of Jesus; they express their personal conviction and identified with the cause they were defending. In announcing the Lordship of Jesus, they were making public profession of their faith. Therefore there is an enormous distance between the witness and his witnessing. All one has to do is to reread the accounts of the calling of the prophets to realize this. But it is the witnessing that makes the witness and not the witness that makes the witnessing. (...) The center of gravity of the witness does not lie in himself, but outside of himself, in the object of his witnessing, and that is why there is in him, as witness, an essential imbalance and an essential fragility. (...) The witnessing is stronger than the witness. »¹⁰ There is always a certain indignity of the witness (cf. John the Baptist who says that he is not worthy to untie the sandal strap as well as Peter who lies, etc.). The witness does not understand

⁹ Ceslas SPICQ, « Lexique théologique du Nouveau Testament » Cerf, 1991, p.970. (in English) *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament* (3 Volume Set) Hardcover – January 1, 1995, by Ceslas Spicq (Author), James D. Ernest (Translator), Hendrickson Press.

¹⁰ Jean-Louis CHRÉTIEN, art.cit., p.83-84.

everything that he himself is announcing; to do so, he needs to have the help of the Holy Spirit. St. Augustine wrote a beautiful commentary on this theme of the apostles bearing witness. Here is what he says, « The Holy Spirit will bear witness and you also will bear witness. In fact, since you have been with me from the beginning, you will be able to preach what you know and, if you don't do it now, it is because the fullness of the Spirit is not yet in you. (.....) Surely it is because he will bear witness that you yourselves will bear witness...him in your hearts, you in your words, him in his inspiration, you in the sound of your voice..... »¹¹

To be a witness is to be a disciple-missionary, as Pope Francis asks of us. Can we see ourselves as such? Disciple, that is to say, « a companion of Jesus » who travels along the paths of humanity that he takes; and missionary, that is to say, a witness of his Word especially for the lowly and the poor. The message can be summed up in love and mercy. This is possible if we rely on the « the noble witness of Jesus » as it is said in the First Letter of Timothy 6:13.

III. THE COMMUNITY OF MISSION

In *Evangelii gaudium* Pope Francis speaks of the « evangelizing community » (e.g. n°24) which is none other than the Church. The missionary community is more than the sum of its individual commitments. This is possibly a stumbling block, including at the Assumption where missionary individualism is rather strong.

¹¹ Augustine of Hippo, op.cit., BA 74B, p.221 et 227.

Pope Francis also recalls that « we are all missionary-disciples » (n°120) by virtue of our baptism. « All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients. The new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized. » (*ibid.*)

The Assumption situates itself well in this definition of a missionary community. First of all, because we are religious and we live « in apostolic community ». Our mission finds its origin in our common life and our fraternal sharing. Secondly, because we collaborate intimately with lay-people whom we have learned not to consider as simple second-class aides or assistants. They are partners in the same life project and the same ambition. Finally, our spirit compels us not to favor clericalism and we have followed the direction spelled out by Vatican II in adopting a theology of the People of God: diversity of functions and equality of dignity and rights.

Another Jesuit theologian, Joseph Moingt, spoke of the « missionary community » at a conference held in 2010. Here is what he said then: « conversely, every community will have to give itself a missionary configuration and goal: organize itself mainly in view of a sharing of the Gospel and not a religious celebration, to direct this sharing toward the problems which are being raised around it, open itself to other persons who wish to reflect on these problems, look after the societal milieu in which it is found, with its sufferings and needs, prepare itself for concrete actions which could be undertaken by joining forces with other persons or by simply joining them. That the study of the Gospel be placed at the center of community life: this is the condition that will teach Christians to live as disciples of Christ, to live out his spirit and his thinking, and that will allow them to be mutually nourished by it

and to transmit it to those outside of it. For this reason, Paul placed mind above the gifts of prophecy and of tongues and identified it with love, insofar as it alone was capable and wished to place itself at the service of the building up of the community and, at the same time, the communication of the Word of God to non-believers who came to mingle with the faithful (1 Cor 14): "So what is to be done? I will pray with the spirit, but I will also pray with the mind. [...]. Brothers, stop being childish in your thinking. In respect to evil be like infants, but in your thinking be mature." (v.20). So the same act by which Christians will nurture themselves in the spirit and love of Christ will spread both around them.

Provided that, as I said, this sharing of the Gospel be undertaken with a concrete concern for the salvation of the world. Provided as well that the word of Christians be clearly heard and credible for nonbelievers imbued with the ideas of modernity, that is to say, that it appear to be inspired by freedom of judgment and not only by obedience to a religious institution, and that it be guided by a true interest for the things of the world and not merely for those of religion. »¹²

Therefore there is a missionary community renewal that is to be undertaken. This will take place by a change in the model of animating our parishes, but also by a renewal of our Assumptionist community. We have the wherewithal to do this thanks to our Dalzonian and Augustinian tradition, but are we ready to implement what our Rule of Life demands of us and, for this, to abandon a certain apostolic individualism? If « the word in the name of God, in the name of the Name, is to be signed by the letters of our human hands », this word is symphonic because « the witness of Christ reveals the whole Christ, but it does not

¹² Joseph MOINGT, « Annonce de l'Évangile et structures d'Église », conference delivered at Blois, September 24, 2010.

reveal him totally (*totum sed non totaliter*); it does not exhaust the truth of the one to whom it bears witness. In its witness itself there remains a free and open place for other witnesses, whose face, voice, life, and works will reveal, in their turn, the 'faithful witness' completely, but not totally. »¹³

Exeryone has his place in this act of witnessing which is polyphonic, but which announces the unique Word.

IV. THE MISSIONARY SPIRITUALITY

Pope Francis gives a diagnosis of the spiritual state of missionary agents today. He points out « three ills which fuel one another », namely « a heightened individualism, a crisis of identity and a cooling of fervor. » (E.G n°78). It is a lack of deep spirituality « which turns into pessimism, fatalism, and mistrust. Some people do not commit themselves to mission because they think that nothing will change and that it is useless to make the effort. They think: "Why should I deny myself my comforts and pleasures if I won't see any significant result?" This attitude makes it impossible to be a missionary. » (E.G. n°275). For Pope Francis, one must return to the Risen Christ for « his resurrection is not an event of the past; it contains a vital power which has permeated this world. Where all seems to be dead, signs of the resurrection suddenly spring up. » (E.G. n°276).

We are called to live out a « missionary conversion », that is to say, a profound change in what we think, what we do, and who we are. It means returning to the Word of God which alone will allow us to be apostles of the Good News. A missionary

¹³ Jean-Louis CHRÉTIEN, *op.cit*, p.93.

spirituality, therefore, is a spirituality of the Word. It is biblical and evangelical. It is rooted in thousands of years of history where men and women have have genuinely lived out God's call...prophets, kings, judges, apostles, disciples of Jesus.

Without love of the Word, there can be no missionary life because it is based on a Word that we were sent to proclaim: « Go out into the whole world and make disciples! ».

Pope Francis has a great deal of esteem for a French Jesuit, Michel de Certeau (1925-1986). A specialist of mysticism and the history of ideas, he reflected extensively on the mission in today's world. I cite a passage from a collection of articles entitled, « L'Étranger (The Stranger) »: « To depart, to leave the narrow borders of the land that the Lord already visibly inhabits, to create a land outside of enclosed groups and well-established societies, to leave all behind to go to announce to those who do not know it the Word that God addresses to them and that is meant to open up their lives: ***such is the way of the apostle, sent by the Church, wishing to possess and give nothing but this Gospel to which he would like to add only the commentary of his life.*** "To leave" this world in order to "enter" another: this is his goal, just as it is an initial definition of mission. In fact, he takes with him a suitcase that is full. He is the beneficiary of work that is centuries old. The understanding that he has of the faith is part of a tradition in which the language he claims as his own has been elaborated over ages. His sensitivity itself took its form and its growth in a familial and cultural climate. He wants to convey universal truth, but such will take place only by means of a particular experience that he has had of it and that makes of him, in the land where he goes, a stranger. At least he is certain of finding there the Lord who calls

him and who has already won this land by the sacrifice of his blood. »¹⁴

I have quoted this long passage because it allows us to better understand the condition of the missionary, of the one who leaves. But I like it because it speaks of what goes to the heart of missionary action: the apostle is sent by the Church; he wishes to give the Gospel to which he will add nothing but « the commentary of his life ». The missionary is a living homily by the witness he lives out every day. Isn't this a challenge addressed to us?

Christoph Theobald observes that « what has in fact disappeared in many of the faithful or never took birth is the experience of the *intimate link between hearing the Gospel of God and its proclamation*, a disappearance linked as well to two pitfalls that haunt our contemporary ways of thinking, namely, the persistence of a reductionist concept of mission that would aim at making new believers enter the Catholic Church and a holding back of proclaiming the Gospel to the other whose otherness is perceived as unattainable privacy and a fortress inaccessible to any word from without. »¹⁵

The « de-mission » is this difficulty among Catholics to propose the faith based on the Gospel because of a fear of otherness perceived as inaccessible and a faith even seen as something that must be protected. If the Gospel is a source of life for us, why not share this source with others?

For us Assumptionists, it is truly the Gospel of the Kingdom of God that is

our compass. It is because we want the Kingdom to come that we became disciples and apostles. « The Reign (or Kingdom)

¹⁴ Michel de CERTEAU, « L'Étranger », DDB, 1991, pp.67-68

¹⁵ Christoph THEOBALD, « Urgences pastorales du moment présent », Bayard, 2017, p.472.

of God is at the center of the preaching and activity of Jesus. This centrality has been rarely contested, since the evidence is overwhelming. The formula “Reign of God” or, in its Matthean version “Kingdom of God. » is found 65 times in the gospels, to which one could add 22 times in the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas. It appears in every genre of Jesus’ discourses: parables, exhortations, controversies and sayings. The statistics alone reveal that we’re dealing with an expression that was truly his own ». ¹⁶ For Jesus, the Kingdom is not something for tomorrow, but « it is the Reign awaited for the end of time, » he affirms, « that is breaking in even now ». ¹⁷ The Kingdom waited for centuries *is not coming; it has arrived*.

You will understand then that we are already to experience the proximity of the Kingdom ourselves. « Thy Kingdom come! » is not some kind of commercial slogan, but a passionate call to live from the message of Christ here and now. Emmanuel d’Alzon was an apostle of the Kingdom because he wanted it to grow in us and around us. His Christ-centered spirituality allowed him to be filled with the desire to bear witness to his faith and to live it out daily. I dare say that the spirituality of the Assumption is a missionary spirituality and that still today it is capable of allowing us to bear witness « in season and out of season ». In a « retreat preached to men » in 1873, Emmanuel d’Alzon spoke of Christian propaganda. He underlined the quotation of St. Paul in the Letter to the Roman: « it is the hour now for you to awake from sleep » (Rm 13:11). For him, one must be convinced of what he is proclaiming, he needs energy, prudence, and selflessness. (E.S. p.610-613)

¹⁶ Daniel MARGUERAT, « Vie et destin de Jésus de Nazareth », Seuil, 2019, p.121.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p.127.

Pope Francis likes to speak of that Church which « goes forth » to describe the missionary Church. « The Church which “goes forth” is a community of missionary disciples who take the first step, who are involved and supportive, who bear fruit and rejoice.. (...) it knows how to boldly take the initiative, go out to others, seek those who have fallen away, stand at the crossroads and welcome the outcast. (...) Let us try a little harder to take the first step! »¹⁸

In his missionary spirituality the Assumptionist is characterized by *passion, boldness, zeal, selflessness, and initiative*. ‘Bold, generous and disinterested,’ we like to say. Passion finds its source in Jesus Christ: known, loved, and imitated. It takes shape in the service of the Father and in the love of the Spirit who transforms us. The more that we are in close relationship with Jesus, the more we will be missionary-disciples.

The Pope insists on boldness and courage. « Spirit-filled evangelizers are evangelizers who pray and work. Mystical notions without a solid social and missionary outreach are of no help to evangelization, nor are dissertations or social or pastoral practices which lack a spirituality which can change hearts. (...) What is needed is the ability to cultivate an interior space which can give a Christian meaning to commitment and activity. Without prolonged moments of adoration, of prayerful encounter with the word, of sincere conversation with the Lord, our work easily becomes meaningless; we lose energy as a result of weariness and difficulties, and our fervour dies out. » (n°262)

¹⁸ Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, n°24.

V. FORMING ASSUMPTIONISTS FOR MISSION

I would now like to go over some attitudes that I deem necessary for one to possess in order to live out the mission received, peacefully and joyfully.

1) Availability

« It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give you. » Jn 15:16

A vocation is a response to a call. It is neither the choice of a career nor some kind of professional training. It is the gift of our person so that the Lord may make of us what he desires. At the heart of this response which we give to the Lord, there is availability.

Having a good knowledge of our brothers and communities across the world, I am delighted to see how the availability of our elders, their spirit of willingness, allowed the Assumption to extend its charism to so many countries in the world. Without the courage and boldness of our missionaries, we would never have gone to Africa, Oceania, the Americas, or Asia. The Assumption settled on these continents in order to give birth to living and dynamic branches of the old trunk that came to birth in Nîmes in 1845.

This availability and spirit of openness must be sustained and encouraged. We will have no future if we prefer our tranquility and our comfort to missionary boldness.

Availability is the attitude which Jesus demanded of his disciples. Let us reread this Gospel passage to draw from it the

essential lesson. « As they were proceeding on their journey someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." Jesus answered him, "Foxes have dens and birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head." And to another he said, "Follow me." But he replied, "Lord, let me go first and bury my father." But he answered him, "Let the dead bury their dead. But you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." And another said, "I will follow you, Lord, but first let me say farewell to my family at home." To him Jesus said, "No one who sets a hand to the plow and looks to what was left behind is fit for the kingdom of God." » Lk 9:57-62.

This pericope challenges us, because it obviously allows us to look back at our lives. What is my attitude with regard to the call of the Lord? What are the obstacles that I am often tempted to create in order to avoid responding generously to the requests made to me ?

This absolute availability was already underlined by Paul VI in *Evangelii nuntiandi*: « Religious, for their part, find in their consecrated life a privileged means of effective evangelization. At the deepest level of their being they are caught up in the dynamism of the Church's life, which is thirsty for the divine Absolute and called to holiness. It is to this holiness that they bear witness. They embody the Church in her desire to give herself completely to the radical demands of the beatitudes. **By their lives they are a sign of total availability to God, the Church and the brethren.**

As such they have a special importance in the context of the witness which, as we have said, is of prime importance in evangelization. At the same time as being a challenge to the world and to the Church herself, this silent witness of poverty and abnegation, of purity and sincerity, of self-sacrifice in obedience, can become an eloquent witness capable of touching also non-Christians who have good will and are sensitive to certain values.

In this perspective one perceives the role played in evangelization by religious men and women consecrated to prayer, silence, penance and sacrifice. Other religious, in great numbers, give themselves directly to the proclamation of Christ. Their missionary activity depends clearly on the hierarchy and must be coordinated with the pastoral plan which the latter adopts. But who does not see the immense contribution that these religious have brought and continue to bring to evangelization? **Thanks to their consecration they are eminently willing and free to leave everything and to go and proclaim the Gospel even to the ends of the earth.** They are enterprising and their apostolate is often marked by an originality, by a genius that demands admiration. They are generous: often they are found at the outposts of the mission, and they take the greatest of risks for their health and their very lives. Truly the Church owes them much. »¹⁹

2) Joy

« Each must do as already determined, without sadness or compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. » 2 Cor 9:7

Our world is sad. When close relationships weaken and egoism rises, men and women suffer more and more from loneliness. The rise of individualism which emerged during the Enlightenment has continued its triumphant march everywhere on earth. Even regions and cultures which boast of their ancestral tradition of solidarity have not been spared. It would be an illusion to believe that Christians would be immune from this strong trend of individualism. Even if the Christian faith is a personal response and a free choice, it is, as well, entry into a community of believers

¹⁹ Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, n°69

which is called the Church. And the Church is a universal fraternity which wishes to bring down the walls between cultures, languages, and nations. The Christian, and religious themselves, have to fight against individualism and I believe that the best answer we can give is the joy that we carry within us. The joy that comes from being sons of God, brothers in Christ and saved for all eternity. This joy is shared in community in order that it might bear witness to life and solidarity. The 33rd general chapter reminded us just how important the joy that our charism brings is (cf. Acts, n°5).

« We are inspired to act by the example of all those priests, religious, and laity who devote themselves to proclamation and to serving others with great fidelity, often at the risk of their lives and certainly at the cost of their comfort. Their testimony reminds us that, more than bureaucrats and functionaries, the Church needs passionate missionaries, enthusiastic about sharing true life. The saints surprise us, they confound us, because by their lives they urge us to abandon a dull and dreary mediocrity. »²⁰

3) *Passion*

No one can serve God if he does not carry within himself passion for the Kingdom. D'Alzon was a man on fire; he was aflame with the Spirit of God. We inherited from Emmanuel d'Alzon this passion but do we know how to maintain it, develop it, and propose it to those around us? Are we still seduced by the Lord after years of religious life? As Jeremiah said, (Jer 20:7), « Lord, you seduced me and I let myself be seduced; you were too strong for me, and you prevailed. »

²⁰ Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate*, n°138.

Is it possible that we need more passion? Very often I have observed that there is a certain lukewarmness in religious life and in the realization of our apostolic work. Emmanuel d'Alzon liked to speak of the zeal that should guide our Assumptionist life. This is another way of speaking of the passion for the Kingdom. We are not bureaucrats, some kind of functionaries that know that their work is guaranteed whatever they may do, but we are adventurers of God. The service of God and his Kingdom is probably among the last places where a true adventure can be experienced in this world. I expect of every Assumptionist that this passion be manifested day in and day out. Do I thirst to read and meditate on the Word every day? Am I a man of the Beatitudes who desires peace, justice, and tenderness on this earth? Do I so love God and my neighbor that I wish that our world live in love and unity?

Pope Gregory the Great already complained of the lack of zeal among the priests of his time. This complaint still resonates today: « Let us listen to what the Lord says as he sends the preachers forth: *The harvest is great but the laborers are few. Pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send laborers into his harvest.* We can speak only with a heavy heart of so few laborers for such a great harvest, for although there are many to hear the good news there are only a few to preach it. Look about you and see how full the world is of priests, yet in God's harvest a laborer is rarely to be found; for although we have accepted the priestly office, we do not fulfill its demands. »²¹

During my visits to our communities, I find men doing their duty and faithful to their mission, but it seems to me that they

²¹ Gregory the Great, Hom. 17,3, 14:PL 76, 1139-1140, 1146 commenting on Luke 10:2/Matthew 9:37) is used in the Roman Catholic Office of Readings for Saturday of the 27th week in Ordinary Time with the accompanying biblical reading taken from I Timothy 6:11-21.

often lack daring. The urgency of the Kingdom remains and we are called « to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope » (1 Pet 3:15). Let us not be afraid, turning in on ourselves, but let us dare to proclaim the Kingdom in season and out of season. It serves no purpose, I think, for us to complain about how hard the times are and to list everything that is going wrong in the world and the Church. Our mission is directly linked to hope and that is what leads us to dare doing more than we would be able to do on our own. In my letter on Christian hope last year, I wanted to drive this point home. The man of hope is not an optimist who tells himself that things will get better tomorrow. Rather he is a man who is lucid and sees the difficulties but who knows that, with the grace of God, nothing is ever definitively lost. Daring is that Assumptionist quality that allows us to do things in spite of all the obstacles in our path. Passion for the Kingdom is the energy that we need to transcend our fears and limitations. Let us not fear to call on the Lord that he may give us this passion and this daring!

4) Deepening one's consecration day after day

The Assumptionist is a religious. This affirmation is so banal that it might appear useless to even say it, yet it is good to call to mind regularly what is at the heart of our life: religious consecration. Often the ideal that young people who knock at our door bring with them is that of the priesthood. 50 years after Vatican II some still speak of « priesthood, » while forgetting the ministries of service and simply seeing it as the entry into a priestly caste. As for me, it has been for some time that I have preferred to use the word « presbyterate » rather than that of « priesthood ». The priesthood is borne by Christ who alone is priest, the Unique priest of the new Alliance. The disciples of Jesus

are associated with his priesthood by baptism that makes of them « priests, prophets and kings ». Even if we have given priority to our religious consecration in our choice of life, we still need to deepen even more our religious life. Pope Francis, in his repeated criticisms of clericalism, invites us to return to the traditional teaching of the Church that, in fidelity to the Gospel, calls believers to live out a brotherhood in an equality of dignity and a diversity of functions. Religious life is prophetic to the extent that it clearly makes the choice of brotherhood a priority and vigorously rejects the clerical abuses that allow a caste to seize power. The Assumption has a healthy tradition of brotherhood. The religious-lay Alliance, which has experienced fresh impetus over the last 20 years more or less, has allowed us to reinforce this dimension of openness and coresponsibility. The Church is a people that is guided by the Spirit and that contributes to the work of salvation of the Lord Jesus. We are workers of the Kingdom. Priestly ministry is the response to a call to serve the People of God by making oneself humble and small. Religious life must give us the opportunity to renew our concept of ministries and, in so doing, help the Institution to be relevant in its proclamation of the Gospel in our new times.

« The specific contribution of consecrated persons, both men and women, to evangelization is first of all the witness of a life given totally to God and to their brothers and sisters, in imitation of the Saviour who, out of love for humanity, made himself a servant. In the work of salvation, in fact, everything comes from sharing in the divine *agape*. Consecrated persons make visible, in their consecration and total dedication, the loving and saving presence of Christ, the One consecrated by the Father, sent in mission. Allowing themselves to be won over by him (cf. Phil 3:12), they prepare to become, in a certain way, a prolongation of his humanity. The consecrated life eloquently shows that the more one lives in Christ, the better one can serve

him in others, going even to the furthest missionary outposts and facing the greatest dangers. »²²

5) Humility

One of the fundamental attitudes of a religious and of a pastor is humility. We seek neither glory nor honors in becoming servants of the Lord. Unfortunately, it is well known that certain individuals envisage a career in the Church as a promotion or the opportunity to gain certain benefits. This is an unqualified counter-witness to the spirit of the Gospel. Even though our congregation is recognized in the Church as a « clerical congregation », this should in no way hide the prophetic dimension of religious life. Pope Benedict gave a beautiful talk on priestly ministry at an ordination celebration in St. Peter's Basilica. I am quoting a long passage from this talk, because it is quite explicit and remains for us a wonderful lesson.

« The Gospel we have heard this Sunday is only a part of Jesus' great discourse on shepherds. In this passage, the Lord tells us three things about the true shepherd: he gives his own life for his sheep; he knows them and they know him; he is at the service of unity. Before reflecting on these three characteristics essential to shepherds, it might be useful to recall briefly the previous part of the discourse on shepherds in which Jesus, before designating himself as the Shepherd, says, to our surprise: "I am the door" (Jn 10: 7).

It is through him that one must enter the service of shepherd. Jesus highlights very clearly this basic condition by saying: "he who... climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber" (Jn 10: 1). This word "climbs" - *anabainei* in Greek -

²² John Paul II, *Vita consecrata*, n°76.

conjures up the image of someone climbing over a fence to get somewhere out of bounds to him.

"To climb"---here too we can also see the image of careerism, the attempt to "get ahead", to gain a position through the Church: to make use of and not to serve. It is the image of a man who wants to make himself important, to become a person of note through the priesthood; the image of someone who has as his aim his own exaltation and not the humble service of Jesus Christ.

But the only legitimate ascent towards the shepherd's ministry is the Cross. This is the true way to rise; this is the true door. It is not the desire to become "someone" for oneself, but rather to exist for others, for Christ, and thus through him and with him to be there for the people he seeks, whom he wants to lead on the path of life.

One enters the priesthood through the Sacrament, and this means precisely: through the gift of oneself to Christ, so that he can make use of me; so that I may serve him and follow his call, even if it proves contrary to my desire for self-fulfilment and esteem.

Entering by the door which is Christ means knowing and loving him more and more, so that our will may be united with his will, our action become one with his action.

Dear friends, let us pray ever anew for this intention, let us strive precisely for this: in other words, for Christ to grow within us and for our union with him to become ever deeper, so that through us it is Christ himself who tends the flock. »²³

Pope Francis himself has also been tireless in condemning careerism that poisons religious and priestly life. At the Assumption, we must be ever vigilant. Authentic religious life is a demanding road that requires sacrifices and humility. Sacrifices

²³ Benedict XVI, Homily, St. Peter's Basilica, May 7, 2006

because it is inconceivable that we would give our life without surrendering whatever distances us from God and others. Choosing God is a radical choice that brings with it personal sacrifices. But God gives a hundredfold to the one who knows how to free himself from all that enslaves him. Humility, as Augustine said, is the path of the true servant.

6) Attentiveness to the needy

The true missionary cannot but be a man in solidarity with a fragile humanity. He is the servant of his brothers and notably of the weakest and the neediest. Working for the coming of the Kingdom of God exposes us to taking sides on the part of justice and peace at the risk of our comfort and tranquility. Did we become religious to sink into an existence without troubles or worries? No! In a world where inequalities are expanding and where the primacy of the economy over human beings fosters the rejection of the weak whether they be migrants, the handicapped, the aged, or outsiders it is ever more urgent that we react by becoming personally involved in active solidarity. Likewise, our commitment to safeguarding Creation requires us to change our ways of doing things in order that we not contribute to depleting the Earth's resources. An Assumptionist who wishes to recall the « social dimension » of his charism can contribute to a missionary renewal by getting involved in the work for Justice and Peace. In this struggle the Church could regain a credibility it has unfortunately lost.

7) *Serving the truth*

Following Christ compels us to seek God and to listen to his Word. Being seekers of God is surely our goal in becoming religious; if not, we will remain mediocre and tepid.

Benedict XVI in his speech to the world of culture during his visit to France delivered a very rich talk. I cite a passage concerning bearing witness because it offers us an opportunity to understand what we should be encouraging in our studies: having intelligence that is simultaneously open to reason and to faith. Our intellectual culture should be built on the serious study of theology; however, a deep understanding of the philosophical and theological disciplines should be strengthened by taking into account contemporary culture in all its diversity. For us Christians, the Truth is Jesus Christ!

« In fact, Christians of the nascent Church did not regard their missionary proclamation as propaganda, designed to enlarge their particular group, but as an inner necessity, consequent upon the nature of their faith: the God in whom they believed was the God of all people, the one, true God, who had revealed himself in the history of Israel and ultimately in his Son, thereby supplying the answer which was of concern to everyone and for which all people, in their innermost hearts, are waiting. The universality of God, and of reason open towards him, is what gave them the motivation—indeed, the obligation—to proclaim the message. They saw their faith as belonging, not to cultural custom that differs from one people to another, but to the domain of truth, which concerns all people equally. »²⁴

²⁴ Benedict XVI, Address to Representatives from the World of Culture, Collège des Bernardins, Paris, September 12, 2008.

By virtue of its significant geographical spread the Assumption is facing a diversity of cultures and traditions and, as a result, it is called to redouble its efforts in its understanding of the faith. As Benedict XVI says, there is urgency in strengthening the link between faith and reason in order to serve the Truth. I invite Assumptionist students to develop a love for studies so that they may « give the reason for their hope ». True inculturation of the faith calls for a deepened appreciation of the Tradition, of the Scriptures, of philosophy, and of the sciences.

But serving the truth also means being able to proclaim Jesus in the modern world in a language capable of touching the hearts and minds of our contemporaries. This effort of inculturation also entails the obligation to adapt our preaching to the modern world and to use a language accessible to all. It is urgent to present the faith beyond the repetition of traditional forms of expression which often say very little today. There's a lot of work on a spiritual and intellectual level to be undertaken in order that our language speaks of Jesus Christ in a relevant way so that it may be welcomed.

8) The missionary spirit

Assumptionists are missionaries. They are sent, they are apostles, they are on the way. We are on the move, we are leaving behind our sources of security in order to dare proclaiming the Gospel. This necessarily entails an expatriation, but we are always called to expose ourselves to the Spirit who blows where he wills...

« Consecrated persons, in fact, have the task of making present even among non-Christians Christ who is chaste, poor, obedient, prayerful and missionary. While remaining ever faithful to their charism they must know that they have a special share in

the Church's missionary activity, in virtue of their interior consecration made to God. »²⁵

The Assumption cannot be satisfied with remaining in lands where they have had foundations for some time. As Jesus himself did, we are called to go elsewhere, to move on to other towns and villages. Today the world can no longer be considered Christian. Of course, it never was, but Westerners who had lived under a Christian regime for centuries were capable of believing that evangelization was simply a matter of « somewhere else ». Fortunately, movements of missionary renewal understood early on that mission also included the countries of the 'old' Christianity. Mission now includes the whole world. But to have a missionary spirit means « going out », it consists in « proclaiming Jesus Christ » by the witness of our lives and our faith in Him. We are too timid and we too often content ourselves with overseeing Christian communities already in place. Missionary zeal, even in our more recent foundations, seems too limited at times. How can we not be concerned with the masses passing over to the neo-Protestant, evangelical churches, not to mention to Islam? As for indifference, it continues to grow. These are the facts and they are indisputable: it is urgent for the Assumption to work twice as hard in its missionary endeavors. I am proud that the Assumption has been able to make foundations in remote areas where the Gospel is unknown. I am thinking particularly of our communities in Tanzania and Madagascar, such as those of Digodigo and Loliondo, that are preaching the Gospel to the Sonjo and Masai peoples, or those south of Toliara (Tuléar) at Fotadrevo for example. However, one need only take a look at our « old parishes » to see that there's still a lot to do in proclaiming Jesus Christ to those who have hardly heard of him. Whether it be in Kinshasa, Rio de

²⁵ John Paul II, *Vita consecrata*, n°77.

Janeiro, Paris, or Boston, wherever we are, proclaiming the Gospel must be pursued with increased vigor.

So, what can the Assumption do? We are religious --- which means that we see, as Jesus saw it, « the misery of his people ».

9) « *Until Christ be formed in you.* » (Gal 4:19)

The goal of an Assumptionist formation is make the Teacher Within, Jesus Christ, grow so that he might fill the heart of every religious. We desire to imitate Christ by giving him full rein over us. The Assumption has a tradition of a spirituality of action and this is manifested notably in apostolic prayer. I remember, when I was a novice, Fr. Hervé Stéphan introduced us to this. It consists in taking time each day to come to « the feet of the Lord » in order to speak to him of our missionary activity and to discern how we acted as God's co-workers.....taking a look at what we did and said, seeking out where God was present, and giving thanks for the work accomplished. This prayer slowly makes of us apostles of the Kingdom. We hear an echo of this apostolic prayer in *Vita consecrata*:

« Institutes involved in one or other form of the apostolate must therefore foster *a solid spirituality of action*, seeing God in all things and all things in God. In fact, "it is necessary to know that, just as a well-ordered life tends to pass from the active to the contemplative, so the soul generally returns with profit from the contemplative life to the active life, in order more perfectly to sustain the active life with the flame ignited in contemplation. Thus, the active life ought to lead to contemplation and, sometimes, from what we see interiorly, contemplation should more effectively call us back to action". Jesus himself gave us the perfect example of how we can link communion with the Father to an intensely active life. Without a constant search for this unity,

the danger of an interior breakdown, of confusion and discouragement, lurks always near. Today as yesterday, the close union between contemplation and action will allow the most difficult missions to be undertaken. »²⁶

VI. MOVING FORWARD WITH CHRIST

As Pope Francis has requested, we are to become missionary-disciples, witnesses of our faith in the Resurrection. In a world that keeps God at a distance, we can approach our brothers and sisters through the humanity of Christ and through our own humanity.

The Assumption has become less Western and more African and Asian, but more than the future of the Assumption the future of a Christ-centered message is the issue and challenge for us. We are apostles sent to speak the Good News of salvation. More than ever we have to bear witness to our faith in the Risen Jesus. In spite of our unworthiness, in spite of our weakness, the message we bear is a force for transformation. But there are many conversions to be undertaken:

- Passing from missionary to a missionary community
- Passing from proselytism to bearing witness: the missionary disciple
- Passing from Christianity to Christ
- Passing from clericalism to brotherhood.

The transition of the Assumption from North to South must be experienced as good news, that is to say, as the possibility of a new missionary dawn...not to abandon the secularized lands of the West, but to rouse us to bring Christian salvation everywhere.

²⁶ John Paul II, *Vita consecrata*, n°74

From now on religious will largely be African and Asian. They are probably no better than their elders, but they are open to the mission as the former were. We must develop interculturality and show that our Homeland is the Kingdom of God. We must go out, we must go beyond ethnocentrism and stop creating as absolutes our cultural, linguistic, and ideological points of references. God is the one who brings down walls.

« But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have become near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, he who made both one and broke down the dividing wall of enmity, through his flesh, abolishing the law with its commandments and legal claims, that he might create in himself one new person in place of the two, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile both with God, in one body, through the cross, putting that enmity to death by it. He came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near, for through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the holy ones and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the capstone. Through him the whole structure is held together and grows into a temple sacred in the Lord; in him you also are being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. » Eph 2:13-22)

The missionary renewal at the Assumption takes place as the result of the *availability and openness of everyone*. It means saying, « Here I am, send me! » (Is 6,8) The Lord has the ability to empower us to do more than we ever imagined. The new lands are many: the digital world, the world of ethics and of ecology, the world of the excluded and migrants, the world of the poor and the lowly, the world of culture and the arts.... The lands to be explored remain numerous for the name of the Lord to be proclaimed there.

CONCLUSION

Let us listen to an excerpt from Pope Francis' Angelus address on June 30, 2019. He speaks of the three virtues necessary for evangelization: « In order to follow Jesus, the Church is itinerant, acts promptly, quickly and decisively. The value of these conditions set by Jesus — *itnerancy, promptness and decision* — does not lie in a series of saying 'no' to the good and important things in life. Rather, the emphasis is placed on the main objective: to become a disciple of Christ! A free and conscious choice, made out of love, to reciprocate the invaluable grace of God, and not made as a way to promote oneself. This is sad! Woe to those who think about following Jesus for their own advantage, that is, to further their career, to feel important or to acquire a position of prestige. Jesus wants us to be passionate about him and about the Gospel. A heartfelt passion which translates into concrete gestures of proximity, of closeness to the brothers and sisters most in need of welcome and care. Precisely as he himself lived. »

The Assumption is a missionary congregation. By our witness we participate in the proclamation of the Risen Christ. By means of our many pastoral commitments and their broad diversity, we are missionary disciples. The Assumption has not spoken its last word since it is with the Lord's words themselves that it proclaims today that the Kingdom is already here.

Very Rev. Benoît GRIÈRE, A.A.

Superior general

August 29, 2019

Feast of the Martyrdom of John the Baptist

INDEX

INTRODUCTION.....	5
I. The mission at the Assumption.....	8
1) <i>The missionary spirit of Fr. Emmanuel d'Alzon.....</i>	<i>8</i>
2) <i>The mission over time.....</i>	<i>9</i>
3) <i>The 33rd general chapter of 2017.....</i>	<i>12</i>
II. The 'missionary disciple'	13
1) <i>The change in a paradigm.....</i>	<i>14</i>
2) <i>Witness to the Risen Christ: the proclamation of the Kingdom of God</i>	<i>17</i>
III. The community of mission	20
IV. The missionary spirituality.....	23
V. Forming Assumptionists for mission	28
1) <i>Availability.....</i>	<i>28</i>
2) <i>Joy.....</i>	<i>30</i>
3) <i>Passion.....</i>	<i>31</i>
4) <i>Deepening one's consecration day after day.....</i>	<i>33</i>
5) <i>Humility.....</i>	<i>35</i>
6) <i>Attentiveness to the needy.....</i>	<i>37</i>
7) <i>Serving the truth.....</i>	<i>38</i>
8) <i>The missionary spirit</i>	<i>39</i>
9) <i>« Until Christ be formed in you. » (Gal 4:19).....</i>	<i>41</i>
VI. Moving forward with Christ	42
Conclusion.....	44

Augustinians of the Assumption
Via San Pio V, 55
I - 00165 Roma
Tel.: 06 66013727 - Fax: 06 6630814
E-mail: Assunzione@mclink.it