

“IT WAS I WHO CHOSE YOU”

John 15:16



**Letter # 8 to the Congregation
on vocation**

Cover illustration: "The Vocation of St. Matthew" (Caravaggio, Church of St. Louis of the French, Rome).

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INTRODUCTION

Dear Brothers and friends of the Alliance,

This letter is the fruit of long reflection on vocations in the Church and particularly at the Assumption. As we know, our congregation has always had a concern to serve as intermediaries of God's bidding to men and women. The Kingdom that is at hand needs workers, whether they be priests, lay-people, religious, or consecrated persons. Our *Rule of Life* reminds us that we work « to support Christian vocations, particularly religious and priestly vocations » (#16). Three other numbers (#133-135) specify the demands of vocation ministry. Emmanuel d'Alzon tirelessly urged the Assumption to awaken vocations, saying that it was an essential apostolic priority of the Institute. Alummates, the work of Our Lady of Vocations (Notre-Dame des Vocations), residences for young people, schools, chaplaincies at universities and at other educational institutions.... all of these demonstrate our family's concern to reach out to young people and invite them to reflect on the meaning of their lives and to help them to find the right path under the Lord's watchful gaze.

Twelve years ago, in 2008, Fr. Richard Lamoureux wrote a letter entitled « *Companions for those who are called* ». This letter continues to be instructive with respect to its reflection on the question of vocations at the Assumption as well as that of the formation we use to assure that we are preparing men well rooted in society and in the Church in order that they might proclaim the Kingdom of God. The current letter will address certain points so as to spark anew our reflection and our actions.

Today the recruiting scene at the Assumption presents quite a mix. Lands that were once called Christian are witnessing their sources of renewal drying up. The young Churches, products of missionary efforts, are alive and are dealing, for some of them, with an influx of candidates. However, the Holy See is troubled by the cruel realization of a hemorrhaging in the number of consecrated men and women that is linked to the many departures taking place after several years of commitment. And what exactly is happening with vocation ministry at the Assumption? Are we faithful to Fr. d'Alzon's demand that we work wholeheartedly in this work? Are we capable of updating our approaches and methods with young people? Do we still have enough faith in the future of our family to dare to call the young in God's name? There is one conviction behind this letter: God continues to call and he never ceases to surprise us with his infinite love.

This letter is divided into three major parts. The first is a reflection on vocation inspired by the light the Scriptures shed. The second part is dedicated to the discernment of vocations. What are we doing to have vocations that are fulfilled and happy? What criteria are we using? The tradition proper to the Assumption with St. Augustine and Emmanuel d'Alzon will also provide us with several particular insights. Finally, the third part will treat the formation of young religious. For one thing is certain: even if a vocation is the fruit of a personal call from God to a concrete person, its realization depends, in large part, on the way in which it is accompanied. Religious life is a demanding path that requires time and patience, as well as faith, hope, and charity.

I. THE CALL

1) *The call of God*

There's no point in belaboring the etymology of the word « vocation » which comes from the word « to call ». It helps us to understand that there must be at least two parties involved: the one who calls and the one who is called. The source of the call, for the one who responds to the invitation, is God. But how does God work in calling men to follow Him? What is this voice that I think I have heard and that gets me moving? What must I do to recognize the voice of God amidst all the other voices that beckon me? The God of the Bible is a God who speaks. He calls into existence, he calls to life, he sets in motion, he pardons, and he blesses.¹ But God also listens and he hears the suffering of his people. God enters into dialogue with humanity and into covenant with it.

« We often use the word, “vocation” or “vocations” only in the sense... of priestly or religious vocations. And we often forget that if there is a call, there is a call to or for something. The word “to call” awaits a complement, that which broadly opens up the field of discernment, that at first may be wonder at and thanksgiving for what has been stirred up, from what God calls, elicits, from what he awakens. God's call is always radical; it shapes our life or it reshapes it; it *orients* it, in the strongest sense of the word, turning it to His Orient, His...rising! We are first of all at the service of this recognition, of this discernment of what God

¹ cf. article of Jacques NIEUVIARTS, « L'appel de Dieu et la promesse, un chemin pour l'homme », in *Cahiers de vie religieuse*, n°194, Médiasèvres, 2018, pp.31 to 53. I have taken inspiration from the reflections of our Assumptionist brother.

is awakening, always unique and original, and at outset incapable of being incorporated into what is already known. We are first of all filled with wonder at what God creates in man, as on the first day of creation. Diversity of vocations. »²

But God also calls in order to send us. He makes of those he has chosen, apostles, disciples, missionaries. We have to keep this orientation in mind when vocations are being discerned. God entrusts a mission, and at the Assumption this gets carried out with others. The call is always a call for a mission, for the good or the salvation of a people.

When God addresses us, he is calling on us, challenging us. He requests from a man that he respond to him in full liberty. The accounts of vocations in the Bible, in the Old as well as in the New Testament, illustrate this attitude of God who upholds our freedom. God enters into dialogue with humanity and he wants us to be partners in the Covenant.

« The God who speaks addresses a partner; he calls him to come before him; he desires that he be capable of listening and responding. That is why the entire Bible can be presented and read as a vocation account, of summons sent out to persons or to the People of God, and, more broadly, to all of humanity. »³

There are in life many summons that, for some, stir up a response and, for others, silence. Often, a summons stirs up fear and at other times hope. But our life cannot flourish without any response and « even not choosing is a choice, a fatal one. »⁴ One day we religious and lay members of the Assumptionist Alliance

² Jacques NIEUVIARTS, *op.cit.* pp.39-40.

³ Enzo BIANCHI, « Le discernement », *Fidélité*, 2019, p.84.

⁴ Jean-Louis CHRÉTIEN, « Pour reprendre et perdre haleine. Dix méditations bibliques. » Bayard, 2009, p.30.

heard a call: « Do you wish to follow me? Do you wish to commit yourself? » and we responded.

The call is at the heart of existence, but it takes different forms.

« The word “vocation” can be understood in a broad sense as a calling from God, including the call to life, the call to friendship with him, the call to holiness, and so forth. This is helpful, since it situates our whole life in relation to the God who loves us. It makes us realize that nothing is the result of pure chance but that everything in our lives can become a way of responding to the Lord, who has a wonderful plan for us. »⁵

2) The call is at the heart of the Christian life

In this letter, I will give priority to three calls issued by God: that to humanity, then that to holiness, and finally the particular call to religious life.

- **The human vocation**

By God’s goodness we were called into existence. The first call becomes a reality in our creation. If we exist, it is a result of vocation. The human vocation is the prerequisite of all vocations, for God has made us in his own image and likeness. So the freedom that was given to us enables us to follow the path leading us to our Homeland.

We are all called to live in this world, and our existence is punctuated by various calls to grow in our humanity. We share fully in the common condition and the first vocation is plainly that of becoming men and women. I really like this quotation from Fr.

⁵ Pope Francis, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Christus vivit*; March 25, 2019, #248.

Varillon who reminds us that « God divinizes what we humanize »⁶. Our task is humanization. It is important to grow oneself along one's path. Pope Francis said it clearly: « To respond to our vocation, we need to foster and develop all that we are. This has nothing to do with inventing ourselves or creating ourselves out of nothing. It has to do with finding our true selves in the light of God and letting our lives flourish and bear fruit. »⁷

Just as parents who are attentive to the growth of their children, we must take care to see to it that each person, each member of the community finds his place. Not a place reserved from all eternity, but a place where he can be fulfilled in freedom and fidelity to the call he has heard. It is a delicate exercise that consists first of all in listening closely to the person but also the Spirit. The Word of God is the first point of contact in helping us discover the way.

- **The Christian vocation: the call to holiness**

« it must always be remembered that the first and most important vocation is the vocation we have received in baptism.»⁸

In our humanness, God invites us to become his sons in Jesus. As John the Evangelist says, « To those who did accept him he gave power to become children of God, to those who believe in his name » (Jn 1:12). Baptism makes us part of the community of believers and makes of us members of the Body of Christ. Holiness is the horizon of our life and no one is exempt. « We are all called to be holy by living our lives with love and by bearing

⁶ François VARILLON, « Joie de croire, joie de vivre », Bayard, 2013, p.46.

⁷ *Christus vivit*, #257.

⁸ *Christus vivit*, #267.

witness in everything we do, wherever we find ourselves » *Gaudete et exsultate* #14).

Quite appropriately Pope Francis reminds us that to be a saint is everyone's vocation; it is not reserved to those duly recognized by the Church and celebrated at our altars. « The Holy Spirit bestows holiness in abundance among God's holy and faithful people, for "it has pleased God to make men and women holy and to save them, not as individuals without any bond between them, but rather as a people who might acknowledge him in truth and serve him in holiness" (*Lumen gentium* #9) »⁹.

Jesus is the way and we are to undertake our way in order to attain holiness. I believe that religious must place this first, universal, call to holiness at the heart of their own vocation. We don't belong to some kind of elite body when we become consecrated persons, an elite that would be exempt from the human condition of all. Quite the contrary, the demands become more rigorous and we must listen to Christ's call, « Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road broad that leads to destruction, and those who enter through it are many. How narrow the gate and constricted the road that leads to life. And those who find it are few. » (Mt 7:13-14). Saint Augustine liked to speak of our common human condition as a pilgrimage. We are on the way and we are moving toward the Kingdom, to the Homeland. We are all pilgrims, that is to say in the original sense of foreign travelers. Our Homeland is not here. The choice is not between two ways; it is between following a way and simply wandering, « that is to say the going about of someone who is not on a way and who ventures out on an adventure without knowing where he will end up. »¹⁰ In a world where a loss of the sense of meaning

⁹ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, *Gaudete et exsultate*, March 19, 2018, #6.

¹⁰ Jean-Louis CHRÉTIEN, *op.cit.*, p.35.

seems to be spreading everywhere, it is good to remember that the universal call to holiness gives everyone an itinerary that opens to them to life in the fullest. Holiness for all is not some kind of utopia; it is the fruit of our being children of God.

Assumption desires to collaborate in the search for holiness of every man and woman. This is our contribution to the coming of the Kingdom of God.

- **Particular vocations: following the itinerant Jesus**

The Second Vatican Council recognized that there is « a diversity of hierarchical and charismatic gifts »; this diversity of vocations and of functions exists for the sake of the Church and the proclamation of the Kingdom. Specific vocations are a personal choice and correspond to a particular call. What is important consists in keeping the company of Jesus. Following the itinerant Christ « demands in and of itself certain requirements, bearing on the most elementary conditions of our lives, especially the relations we maintain with regard to our possessions and to those nearest to us and those not so near: itinerant disciples must leave behind house, brothers, sisters, mother, father, children, inheritance and work »¹¹. The Church, the Body of Christ, needs a variety of ministries for its growth and also a variety of charisms to manifest the presence of the Kingdom already here. Religious vocations are to be found in the charismatic arena. That is why we must take care with regard to those who give priority to the institutional side of ministries in their choice of the consecrated life. Ordained ministries are not incompatible with religious life but they are related to a specific call of a hierarchical order. Religious life, it must be stated, is not, in essence, hierarchical; it

¹¹ Christoph THEOBALD, « Vous avez dit vocation », Bayard, 2010, p.132.

is the « evangelical memory of the Church », as Jean-Claude Guy¹² expresses it so well. Assumption, a clerical congregation, does not renege on its charismatic origin. It is the product of a passion for the Kingdom that the Holy Spirit sparked in the heart of Emmanuel d'Alzon. Religious life is at the heart of our passion. We are witnesses of God's love for all and this takes precedence over the exercise of any particular ministry.

3) Maintaining a culture of the call

The community of believers grows by issuing a call. One must reread the Acts of the Apostles to see that the first disciples, by their witness, attracted many vocations to baptism. Today we must re-discover and develop this culture of the call. Given that the world is no longer Christian, the encounter with Christ will take place when people encounter those individuals who have placed their faith in the Lord. The culture of the call is open to all vocations without exclusion. Therefore it is to be hoped that each community, as well as each disciple, be able to present the full spectrum of Christian vocations... the baptismal vocation, the vocation to marriage, vocations to specific ministries and to the consecrated life. We need to renew a ministry of the call, obviously basing ourselves on the vocational calls of the great Biblical figures. These help us to understand how God joins in covenant with a partner that he wishes to remain free and responsible. Could it be that we're too timid to issue a call? Could it be that we doubt too much the loving concern of God for us? Could it not be from a lack of faith? Even where vocations are numerous, I am not

¹² Jean-Claude GUY was a French Jesuit (1927-1986), a historian of religious life and renowned for his knowledge of the Desert Fathers about whom he wrote several books, including *Les apophtegmes des Pères du désert*.

sure that there is a real « vocational culture, » that is to say, an ongoing and joyful willingness to contribute to the emergence of vocations. At times it is doubt about one's own vocation that causes reservations in calling young people. At other times, it may be the conviction that this is God's business and his alone. Or it may even be out of fear that one is going against the liberty of someone by making an explicit invitation... In those countries rich in vocations, do we have men passionate for vocation ministry, for issuing a personal call to the young? In secularized countries, are we no longer bold enough to do this? « Between those who recruit in a way that is too cocksure and overbearing and those who sit back and do nothing, there must be a happy medium. »¹³

Let us listen closely to the words of Pope Francis, « If we are indeed convinced that the Holy Spirit continues to inspire vocations to the priesthood and the religious life, we can 'once more cast out the nets' in the Lord's name, with complete confidence. We can dare, as we should, to tell each young person to ask whether this is the path that they are meant to follow. »¹⁴

Essentially the religious who works in vocation ministry — and all of us must take an interest in this ministry whatever we may do — is someone who passes on something of value and is not some kind of disengaged recruiter. Let me explain. It isn't a question of a mission that one would evaluate by setting up some kind of scoring system that resembled a list of achievements or conquests. No, it is rather a question of something much more profound, much more essential; it touches upon the very life of the Spirit. Christ is the Way and it is up to us to indicate where he may be found. We allow others to find the way because we ourselves continue to make progress along this very way.

¹³ Thierry ANNE, « Accompanyer tout élan vers la plénitude », *Christus* n°266, avril 2020, p.85.

¹⁴ *Christus vivit*, #274.

What does the expression « vocation ministry » mean if not the fact of reaching out to people of every kind in order to bring them to Jesus? We are not here to measure God's call in terms of our personal criteria because we would thus be led to recruit individuals who are like us with regard to our qualities and shortcomings. We must always allow ourselves to be surprised by the initiative of God who calls whom he wishes, when he wishes. However, that does not mean that discernment should cease. Quite the contrary!

For us Assumptionists, I think it would be important to recall that we will not have vocations if we do not first of all believe in our own particular vocation. Fr. Timothy Radcliffe, in an interview, responded to the question: « How do you arouse vocations? » Here's what he said: « First and foremost, we must believe in religious life....and all the more so when it runs counter to the values of our times. Secondly, we must prohibit ourselves from recommending to a young person that he enter our Order simply to assure our survival. This is not a good reason. We must be bold enough to say to a young person, 'Why not become a Dominican?' But this isn't the same as recruiting personnel. Rather it is a question of inviting someone to seek out what his own vocation is. Maybe he'll become a Dominican, maybe not. What is important is that he discover where God is calling him. »¹⁵

We could replace « Dominican » with « Assumptionist »; then we would have some direction for our own vocation ministry. First of all, to believe in one's own vocation. That's not the case for everyone. But also not to be afraid to keep engaged with the young people that we meet, all the while respecting their freedom and their capacity to choose the path where they will be happy.

¹⁵ Timothy RADCLIFFE, « Je vous appelle amis ». Entretiens avec Guillaume Goubert, Cerf, 2014, p.68.

4) Models or « figures with whom to identify »

A young person who is asking questions about the meaning of his life needs models, « figures with whom to identify »; that is to say, he needs to see before him men and women who already in their day-to-day lives are authentically living out a commitment that fills their existence with meaning. Who hasn't known such figures along the way? We have all had such individuals who have passed on their fire to us and helped us to grow. Of course, there were our parents and teachers, but others too were able to mark us deeply, if unpretentiously. Personally, I give thanks to God for having placed on my path persons who helped me to find myself and to have an authentic desire to imitate them. I think of the Christian Brothers who were my teachers in early childhood; I recall the chaplain at my high school who trained us to think independently; nor do I wish to forget my novice-master who taught me to love the consecrated life without having any fear of the adventure on which the Spirit would bring me. Then there are so many others who helped me move along my way and for whom I maintain the most profound gratitude. These « figures » aren't in the strictest sense models. Human beings still have their limitations, but they do provide examples of people willing to imitate and follow Jesus Christ.

Today do we understand that we are all called to be such figures to allow young people seeking a life's choice to gain insight that they might move forward along the way of discernment? To do so, we must not act « like infants, tossed by waves and swept along by every wind of teaching arising from human trickery, from their cunning in the interests of deceitful scheming. Rather, living the truth in love, we should grow in every way into him who is the head, Christ » (Eph 4:14-15).

The 'passeur' (the 'relayer' or 'the one who passes on what he has received'), as Christoph Theobald calls him, helps « each

individual to 'give shape' to his life, a unique shape ».¹⁶ He « manages to safeguard basic freedom and does not wish to present himself as a model to be imitated. Identifying with someone is not a process whereby one is transformed into an exact copy. The first characteristic of these multiple figures is precisely the 'you can' which they provide here and now, communicating to the other, often in an unpredictable way, like a hidden energy of life without substituting for him. »¹⁷. Such a one is a true educator.

It is my hope that at the Assumption we have people who can serve as 'relayers', figures with whom to identify. I have in mind all the members of our religious family, including laypersons who can also give themselves over to this task of helping the very young to gain insight about themselves in freedom and truth along their way. In order to be a good 'relayer' it is indispensable that there be in one's life profound coherence between what one says and what one does. We often lack credibility and are irrelevant, because the gap is too great between what we actually do and the ambition that we profess to have for spreading the Kingdom. Let me make what I am thinking absolutely clear: there are no perfect models with which to identify or perfect relayers. Our entire human condition of fragility and vulnerability reveals our shortcomings; but when the gap is too great, there can no longer be any credibility. Just think of the crisis of sexual abuse of minors or of vulnerable adults or of abuses of power. The Church has lost the confidence of many members because this fundamental coherence is missing.

¹⁶ Christoph THEOBALD, « Vous avez dit vocation ? », Bayard, 2010, p.75.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

II. DISCERNING

Vocations exist and they are diverse. But once one becomes aware of them, it is necessary to take the time to discern. It is a question of discovering the path on which I can advance and which will lead me to the Kingdom: marriage, particular ministries, religious consecration, or still others. Discernment is the cornerstone of community, ecclesial and personal discernment.

It is good to remember that « the subject of this discernment process is each individual and it must be repeated that no one can replace the personal conscience of each »¹⁸. It would be a mistake to give up one's responsibility and leave it entirely in the hands of a third party. Of course, discernment is aided and enlightened by the help of the community, one's spiritual director, readings, and the Word of God; but it remains a free act that entails a personal commitment. The current reflection on abuses of power and authority within our Church sadly reminds us that we are not immune from improper behavior. Freedom is the prerequisite of all discernment.

Discerning is a word that keeps coming back in our communities and in our spiritual life. It would be good to have a deeper grasp of this term in order to avoid any misunderstandings.

« So the gift of discernment which the Holy Spirit offers us is aimed above all at a recognition of Jesus as *Kyrios*, Lord, as Son of God, the one who, by his life among us, made known the God whom no one has ever seen. It is only if and when there is this firm, humble, and obedient attachment to the Good News, Jesus Christ

¹⁸ Enzo BIANCHI, *op.cit.*, p.45.

himself, that we can exercise the gift of discernment in daily life, in order to choose attitudes and a style of life correctly ».¹⁹

- **Each in his own way**

Lumen Gentium #11 reminds us that all who believe in Christ, « all the faithful, whatever their condition or state, are called by the Lord, **each in his own way**, to that perfect holiness whereby the Father Himself is perfect ». Picking up on this quote from the Second Vatican Council, Pope Francis, in his apostolic exhortation, « *Gaudete et exsultate* » elaborates: « The important thing is that each believer discern his or her own path, that they bring out the very best of themselves, the most personal gifts that God has placed in their hearts (cf. *1 Cor* 12:7), rather than hopelessly trying to imitate something not meant for them. We are all called to be witnesses, but there are many actual ways of bearing witness. »²⁰

No, it is not true that from all eternity a particular path was set out for me. God has made each one of us and he desires that we keep our freedom intact. We can choose the path we take and we can give shape to it as we move forward. Our faith calls us to declare that Jesus Christ is the Way and there is no other in going to the Father. But we ourselves have our role to play. How? First and foremost, the witness of our lives. We can express the joy that is ours as a result of having followed in the footsteps of Christ. We can also show that in spite of the demands of the Kingdom, a way of growth and fulfillment has been given to us. Certainly there are falls and failings, but God is present at our side. There is a risk in committing oneself, but such a commitment is well worth the while in the light of the faithfulness God exercises on our behalf.

¹⁹ Enzo BIANCHI, *op.cit.*, p.25.

²⁰ *Gaudete et exsultate*, n°11

- **Criteria for discerning**

Even if the primary subject of the discernment is the person himself, the vocation director and Congregational authorities are called to make their voices heard at certain determined moments: acceptance to postulancy and novitiate, first profession, etc. Therefore, there is a heavy responsibility in accompanying the young man so that he might make a decision fully informed of the choice he is making.

It is essential to maintain as strictly as possible the difference between the internal forum and the external forum. The distinction helps to avoid confusion between what must be safeguarded as confidential and what can potentially be communicated. What relates to spiritual direction and touches upon the private life of the individual is of the order of the seal of confession. No one can betray the confidence of a person who has entrusted himself to a director. But it is possible to take a position in the external forum and encourage the one being directed, when one has a strong belief that he cannot follow Christ in religious life and that he should abandon this path.

Let me list some criteria that seem to me to be important to emphasize for a healthy exercise of discernment:²¹

- A passion for the Gospel
- An ability to hear the call of the Church
- A desire to advance along the path
- An ability to give of oneself, a generosity of spirit.

To this list I would add two others that seem important to me for our times and our Institute:

²¹ Christoph THEOBALD, *op.cit.*, p.162

- An ability to change, to make room for the unknown

« If the journey, in effect, leaves no place for freedom, for the unexpected, as well as for being open to the surprise of meeting someone or something and to what is new, unfamiliar, along the way, is it really an authentic journey that is Spirit-led? »²²

While I was preparing my master's degree in theology, I took part in a seminar at the seminary directed by Xavier Thévenot, a Salesian moral theologian (long-time professor at the Institut catholique de Paris). I asked him a question about vocational direction in the actual French context in order to understand what quality was necessary today for entering religious life. Without missing a beat, Fr. Thévenot answered, « a capacity for change ». For him, religious life could no longer be built on a unique model that would never change throughout one's lifetime. The evolution of our societies, marked as they are by rapid and multiple change, requires that a religious know how to adapt constantly. The days have disappeared when, upon entering the Assumption, one could imagine being a professor or a parish priest throughout one's life.

- Openness to others

« That a vocation is false can be sensed when one is not open to life and is closed off from others. Every vocation, even when it does not attract recognition and, even less, distinction, is genuine if it makes us more alive, more attentive to the beauty of creation and more open to others ».²³

Since we are more and more called to live in a world that is diverse both in terms of culture and nation, it is important to avoid everything that favors ethnocentrism and cultural idolatry.

²² Jean-Louis CHRÉTIEN, *op.cit.*, p.36.

²³ Nathalie SARTHOU-LAJUS, « Consentir au risque de vivre » in *Christus* n°266, avril 2020, p.23-24.

Assumptionists are men who love diversity and who do not set up either their culture or their traditions as absolute references.

All these qualities must be lived out with common sense and the ability to make sound judgments.

- **Understanding weaknesses**

Often, confronted with certain weaknesses, one finds it difficult to commit oneself. Here we are facing a delicate issue. What are the irreconcilable weaknesses, those which would make religious life out of the question? Our *Ratio Institutionis* gives some helpful indications. Quite obviously, psychological balance is required, good health is desirable, but also a well-integrated affective life in its various components. What is important is to identify the ability of undertaking a journey while avoiding a certain « Pelagianism », as Pope Francis has noted.

« When some of them tell the weak that all things can be accomplished with God's grace, deep down they tend to give the idea that all things are possible by the human will, as if it were something pure, perfect, all-powerful, to which grace is then added. They fail to realize that 'not everyone can do everything', and that in this life human weaknesses are not healed completely and once for all by grace. »²⁴

One often hears that that religious life could be therapeutic, that it has the capacity of healing in the face of certain handicaps. One must object to this assertion all the while avoiding the trap of elitism. Religious life is not made for supermen; it is meant for everyone. But sometimes obstacles are insurmountable. The sexual abuse crisis brought the question of pedophilia to the forefront and forcefully reminded us that we had often been imprudent and lax before certain deviances. But elitism is also a

²⁴ *Gaudete et exsultate*, n°49.

mistake. God calls those whom he wishes, but he does ask us to discern aptitudes. These aptitudes vary with different congregations. One doesn't ask for the same requirements of a young man who wishes to be a missionary as of one who feels attracted to the cloistered life. But here once again it is discernment carried out seriously that should help a person and the one accompanying him to be able to see whether the way being considered can be pursued peacefully and joyfully.

Therefore it is critical that one be able to recognize his limitations, that is to say, to identify them, to name them, to understand them. How often have we not read in letters of request for vows or ordination this affirmation: « aware of my limitations », but without them being duly enumerated? « The lack of a heartfelt and prayerful acknowledgment of our limitations prevents grace from working more effectively within us, for no room is left for bringing about the potential good that is part of a sincere and genuine journey of growth. »²⁵ In effect, grace has a progressive and historical character.

- **Emmanuel d'Alzon and discernment**

Our founder was attentive to the human qualities of young people who approached him. It was a question of emphasizing the attitudes of transparency, sincerity, honesty, but also the ability to work, simplicity, and the absence of too great an idiosyncrasy. As a good educator Emmanuel d'Alzon also knew that other qualities could be acquitted thanks to formation. One had to exercise patience and good pedagogy. With respect to this matter one should reread the « *The First Constitutions of the Augustinians of*

²⁵ *Gaudete et exsultate*, n°50.

the Assumption. 1855-1865 », especially everything that has to do with « dispositions one must have for entering the Order »²⁶.

« Those in charge of receiving postulants must examine them to discover whether they have a frank, open, generous, flexible character, are not too eccentric, are endowed with sufficient intelligence for studies, good health, able to meditate without too much trouble. Would community life be too great a burden for them? Would they tire others by their unreasonable demands or their whims? Would they seek to introduce their own mentality? »

There are also conditions required for receiving vocations and developing them. I have a particular concern for a certain overstaffing. Emmanuel d'Alzon offered some interesting directives.

- A family spirit

« Influence must not be imposed but inspired: something which is difficult to do when there are great numbers. That is why we limit the number of alumnists. In order to shape them, one needs a family life and try to find me a family life when you have 200, 100, or even 50 students. When you have more than 30, it is almost impossible not to have recourse to punishment. And, in the formation of souls that we desire to provide, punishment is excluded. (...) What we wish to communicate above all is life, divine life. 'I came that they might have life,' Our Lord said, 'and have it to the fullest'. »²⁷

²⁶ Emmanuel d'Alzon, « The First Assumptionist Constitutions, 1855 », in *Foundational Documents*, Milton. Massachusetts, trans. Fr. Richard Richards, A.A., p. 26.

²⁷ Extract of an article by Fr. d'Alzon on the goal and spirit of the alummates, October 15, 1875. - *L'Assomption*, I (1875), p. 173-174

I am concerned about a certain overstaffing in our houses of formation and discernment. But what is to be done when the religious available for formation work are so few in number? I am not advocating a « vocational Malthusianism » but a responsible paternity. We must be good directors who accompany young people well in order to foster greater freedom and responsibility. This demands time and sacrifices.

- Joy

We know the appeal of St. Paul (II Cor 9:7): « Each must do as already determined, without sadness or compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. » Our founder reminds us that joy is a sign of a vocation. « So let us rejoice with exceeding great joy. We are going home to our true homeland, toward our Father, to God.»²⁸

But our Founder was also concerned about preparing religious for discernment. He gave some relevant practical advice. Here is some of what he said:

« We should make every effort to understand just how zealous and prudent we ought to be in seeking out, preparing and finally accepting religious vocations. We find them outside the novitiate; we prepare them during the novitiate (...) We must strive to make the right choices. In this regard, we cannot be too careful, too prudent or too motivated by a spirit of faith. »²⁹

²⁸ *Ecrits spirituels*, p.350

²⁹ *Circular Letters 1874-1875*, translated by Fr. Robert Fortin, A.A., Worcester, Massachusetts, 1981, p. 74.

- **The Augustinian tradition of discernment**

If Ignatian discernment is a pearl of great price in the life of the Church, it remains no less true that our Assumptionist tradition can find a source in our own heritage. It is not a question of replacing one with the other — Ignatius by Augustine — but to benefit from the light offered by the bishop of Hippo who himself had to exercise the art of discernment to find his way and respond to his calling.³⁰

- *Noverim me, noverim te*; Let me know myself and know you (*Soliloquies* II,1; *Confessions* X,I,1)

Augustine wandered for a long time before finding personal stability. The *Confessions* recounts with great clarity the journey he took to gain this stability. Several times Augustine says that it became for him a « tremendous question ». He understood that his heart was riddled by opposing movements which had him leaning at times toward what is good and at others toward what is evil. His participation in a correct decision was complicated by this conflict that finds its origin in the human heart.

Augustinian discernment is based on self-knowledge and knowledge of God. You can't have one without the other. In order for discernment to take place, one must be reborn into an authentic relationship with God; one must have a heart directed to Him. The absence of God also means ignorance of self.

³⁰ One could benefit from taking a look at the article by Marcel Neusch in *Itinéraires augustiniens*, #30 « L'art du discernement selon saint Augustin », 2003, p.5 to 18.

- The struggle between two wills

« So these two wills within me, one old, one new, one the servant of the flesh, the other of the spirit, were in conflict and between them they tore my soul apart »³¹.

The « self » is torn by virtue of sin. Man's struggle takes place with God's help and the grace of the Spirit in order that he might rediscover the path of true freedom. There is a process of conversion that helps man to climb out of the pit and rediscover the true path of freedom. « Then little by little, O Lord, with a most mild and merciful hand you touched and calmed my heart »³².

For discernment, time is needed. Not only does it help a man to take into account his time boundedness and not to remain at the stage of infancy where one thinks that all is possible right away without mediation; but it also makes of us partners in the work of God within us. Therefore it is very important to take time into account and to make of it an ally in the discernment process. We must know how to make a decision when the time is ripe and not push off indefinitely the moment to take this step.

- Forming the conscience.

In order to discern, one needs to learn how to see clearly and this requires that one has a good knowledge of self. It also means learning how to see oneself as he truly is, without fear or favor, but without exaggerating one's faults either.

« But you, O Lord, turned me back upon myself. You took me from behind my own back, where I had placed myself because I did not wish to look upon myself. You stood me face to face with myself so that I might see how foul I was, how deformed and defiled, how covered with stains and sores. I looked, and I was filled with horror, but there was no place for me to flee to, away

³¹ *Confessions*, VIII, V, 10.

³² *Confessions*, VI, V, 7

from myself (...) You placed me in front of myself and thrust me before my own eyes, so that I might find out my own iniquity and hate it »³³.

We are called not to flee from seeing ourselves face to face. The goal of such an undertaking is accepting oneself as he is, without fear or favor, to be sure, but without despair. All of this contributes to building up his inner integrity. Augustine deepened his self-discovery and, at the same time, he also discovered God.

- The personal and ecclesial calling

« The subject of this discernment process is each individual and it must be repeated that no one can replace the personal conscience of each. »³⁴ For Augustine, one had to listen to the Teacher within, Christ, but this didn't mean the end of ecclesial mediations. Discernment is personal, but God also uses human beings to make his voice heard. Jean-Louis Chrétien³⁵ has summarized this well:

« The call is direct, since it reaches me myself in an irreplaceable way, but it is not immediate, since it always reaches me by and in the world, through things that happen and through the words of other men. The transmission of the Word of God is itself dependent of the word of man; God speaks only in giving the Word, in making men speak and not by imposing silence on them. »³⁶

³³ *Confessions*, VIII, VII, 16

³⁴ Enzo BIANCHI, *op.cit.*, p.45.

³⁵ Jean-Louis CHRÉTIEN (1952 – 2019) was a French philosopher in the tradition of phenomenology, as well as a poet and religious thinker. Author of over thirty books, he was the 2012 winner of the Cardinal Lustiger Prize for his life's work in philosophy.

³⁶ Jean-Louis CHRÉTIEN, « L'appel et la réponse », Editions de Minuit, 1992, pp.85-86.

Augustine, while he fully acknowledges the voice within, argues for an authentic community discernment. God speaks but he makes his voice heard by all. « Moreover, the Augustinian tradition will always remain extremely critical, for fundamental theological reasons, with regard to a system of immediacy where God would speak directly to the soul in pure interiority. (...) Even if the call leads us back to our spiritual inner lives, it is in the world that it is audible to sinful man. There is too Christian thinking that would give priority to an inner voice over against the choir of God's witnesses: this would substitute a private and solitary "revelation" to the fundamental Revelation of the Church. To announce Jesus Christ, there must be the voice, the voice of one crying in the desert", the voice of John the Baptist. The summons calls for our voice to be transmitted to others and thus to be understood (...) »³⁷ Little by little, « the voices fall away, as the Word grows »³⁸; community discernment is completed and consensus is established in the Church.

- **Decide and choose**

At the right time, one has to decide. The choice that must be taken can only be done freely, but also in trust and hope. No one is ever totally sure of making a good choice, but without making a decision, and thus undermining responsibility, one sidesteps the human condition. For, not to choose is already a choice.

But once a decision is made, it has to be lived out and one needs to know how to stay on the path.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p.64.

³⁸ Saint Augustine, *Sermon 288*, 5

« To decide does not mean to commit oneself or to bind oneself: as firm as a decision may be, it does not create an obligation; there must also be, in addition, an intentional act whereby I commit myself to do what I have decided. »³⁹

In the Christian arena, the act whereby I commit myself is called a vow, vows, or marriage. The long journey undertaken in discernment should be able to bring one to the point of making a decision. Choosing is necessary. We all know people who never make it to this point, to making up their mind. Then we must help them look elsewhere than religious life. The art of direction calls for a subtle balance to be maintained so that freedom be safeguarded, but also so that such freedom be exercised. If one cannot make a choice, is there authentic freedom? Indecision kills freedom. Once the decision is made to move on to religious vows, one must then help the person to prepare himself to pronounce them. Commitment becomes possible.

III. DIRECTION AND FORMATION

1) Some aspects of formation

For several decades the Congregation has had at its disposal a *Ratio Institutionis*. The first edition was published in 1987; the second appeared in 2005, and finally a complementary version was accepted in 2017 at the 33rd general chapter. This document is paramount and everyone should be familiar with it. It helps to cultivate a taste for the Kingdom. It isn't simply meant for « the young in formation », but, rather, for all religious for we are all

³⁹ Jean-Louis CHRETIEN, « Dans la lumière de la promesse. Vœu et liberté », in « La philosophie au risque de la promesse », Marc Crépon et Marc de Launay (dir.), Bayard, 2004, p.38.

called to allow ourselves to be shaped throughout our religious life.

At the Assumption, when we speak of formation, we encompass within this term several complementary realities. We are all aware that academic and intellectual formation, however important it may be, does not in and of itself exhaust all the various dimensions of an Assumptionist formation. We know that we need to foster a holistic approach to a religious' growth and that this growth rests on three basic pillars: spiritual formation, intellectual formation, and apostolic formation. All of this must be lived out in a community setting that encourages integral human development.

To be formed means to be accompanied by brothers along the way of holiness. Formation at the Assumption is long and demanding. But for whoever accepts the adventure of formation, what he will find is freedom and joy. We need seasoned formators, brothers who are willing to consecrate time to the growth of the youngest among us. This mission is demanding, but exciting if it is lived out trusting in the Holy Spirit.

I will take up only a few elements already treated in the *Ratio*, but these aspects seem to me important to be developed in the framework of the vocational call.

- Forming consciences

« Forming our conscience is the work of a lifetime, in which we learn to cultivate the very sentiments of Jesus Christ, adopting the criteria behind his choices and the intentions behind his actions »⁴⁰.

⁴⁰ *Christus vivit*, n°281, quoted from *Final Document of the Fifteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*, 60

- Developing interiority

« The gift of discernment has become all the more necessary today, since contemporary life offers immense possibilities for action and distraction, and the world presents all of them as valid and good. All of us, but especially the young, are immersed in a culture of zapping. We can navigate simultaneously on two or more screens and interact at the same time with two or three virtual scenarios. Without the wisdom of discernment, we can easily become prey to every passing trend. »⁴¹.

In a world marked by the ephemeral and by the multiplication of the infinite possibilities offered by technology, interiority becomes difficult. Discernment is only possible when and if we are able to stop what we are doing and clearly examine our lives.

- Being formed in the art of listening

If God speaks, as we believe he does, then we must learn how to listen to him. God speaks through the Scriptures, but also through other intermediaries --- nature, creation, the brother or the sister I meet, the one who accompanies me along my spiritual journey, and also world events. We need to rediscover the sense of listening, which is often disturbed by our noisy world, whereas God speaks « in a light silent sound, » like a soft breeze on the mountain (cf. 1 Kgs 19:12).

Our communities are called to be schools of listening... first of all, to the Word of God read, meditated, commented, and celebrated. But also listening to one another with respect and the assurance that the Spirit can be heard in everyone. The world also teaches us a lot if we know how to be attentive to events. As Emmanuel Mounier once said: « Events will be our inner

⁴¹ *Gaudete et exsultate*, n°167.

teacher ». What is missing at times is a hunger for what the world and what happens in it are saying to us. While we hold to our claim of being a congregation invested in the media, we are often little inclined to be informed of what is happening in the world. The Christian who recognizes the presence of God in the world by virtue of the Incarnation of his only Son is aware that the life of the world serves to help us understand his will.

- Formed to discern

Pope Francis, in his apostolic exhortation, *Christus vivit*, consecrates an entire chapter, the ninth, to the theme of discernment. Previously he had spoken of it in *Gaudete et exsultate*. Needless to say, his Jesuit background predisposes him for this topic, but I think that the Pope's insistence reflects above all his strong conviction regarding Christian formation. Discernment helps to orient one's life in giving it authentic meaning.

When the congregation demands that each religious have a spiritual director, it is primarily so that everyone will be able to discern God's will in his own life. This exercise is not optional, because on it rests the capacity to fully develop his vocation. Spiritual direction is an aid in discernment. It requires of the directed a great spirit of freedom and honesty. Of course, we also need to form directors so that we have individuals available and competent in this crucial area. I think we have tremendous efforts to make because, from my observations, spiritual direction is often confused with the Sacrament of Reconciliation or it is a formal practice where there is no real openness of heart.

- Developing the human virtues

There is no authentic formation without a concern for having a human stature characterized by sound affective, psychological, and social maturity. This develops as we live and

remains fragile, but with the passing of time we can acquire a good balance. Pope Francis addressed a group of seminarians and his remarks are enlightening for us. Even if he is speaking about the priesthood, I believe that what he says is equally useful for all consecrated persons.

« A good priest, therefore, is first of all a man with his own humanity, who knows his own history, with its riches and its wounds, and who has learned to make peace with it, reaching an underlying serenity, that of a disciple of the Lord. Human formation is therefore a necessity for priests so that they learn not to be dominated by their limitations, but instead to build on their talents.

A priest who is a peaceful man will know how to spread serenity around him, even in the most trying of moments, conveying the beauty of his relationship with the Lord. It is not normal for a priest to be often sad, nervous or harsh of character; it is not okay and it does no good, neither for the priest, nor for his people. »⁴²

In fact, it is a question of developing one's personality in having as the model. Christ, the perfect man. The *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*, a text coming out of the Congregation for the Clergy on December 8, 2016, also called « The Gift of the Priestly Vocation » recalls this quite appropriately in § 93:

« A correct and harmonious spirituality demands a well-structured humanity; indeed, as St. Thomas Aquinas reminds us, '*grace builds on nature*'; it does not supplant nature but perfects it.

⁴² Pope Francis, Talk to the Participants of the Congress on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of *Presbyterorum Ordinis* and *Optatam totius*, November 20, 2015.

Therefore, it is necessary to cultivate humility, courage, common sense, right judgment and discretion, tolerance and transparency, love of the truth and honesty ».

2) Conversions to be undertaken

Today more than yesterday it seems necessary to insist on the notion of conversion in order that each person might pursue the path he will choose in peace and joy. The rapid evolution of religious life since the Second Vatican Council raises many unprecedented questions. It is no longer possible for us to present to young people who join us an exclusive and never-changing model of what religious apostolic life will look like. Even if the charism continues to nourish the life of our communities and the heart of each one of us, we would do well to prepare ourselves for changes in our style of life and in our mission.

Jean-Claude Guy, a Jesuit author, in a 1985 article, identified three conversions that would be necessary for religious life. On my own I am taking them up again.

- **Conversion to fragility**

Having undertaken the diagnosis of the « crisis of religious life », we must see how to respond to this. We have lost our former power. Some of our major institutions are now in the hands of lay-people; other works have purely and simply been abandoned. In this crisis we have learned fragility and also discovered new modes of functioning. Are you aware of the fact that our enterprise, Bayard, numbers more than 1500 regular salaried employees in the world and that less than 15 religious (men and women) are involved in this work? The reality of religious life must be seen as a « weak reality, ever fragile and never

completed»⁴³. It goes without saying that this lasting and structural fragility of religious life in the world demands of us that we take it into account in the preparation of candidates to Assumptionist religious life. We must form young religious, insisting on the fact that one's vocation is to be welcomed each day as something new.

« To a candidate who comes, one explains to him that his 'vocation' is not received once for all, but that he must continue to welcome it from the Spirit throughout his life and that he will receive it only to the level of seriousness with which he tries to respond to it day by day.»⁴⁴ I think that this requirement is essential to facilitate discernment from the very outset of a vocation. In other words, a candidate who would not have the ability to change and who would be too sure that his vocation was unalterable and eternal should not be kept.

- **Conversion to the fraternal life**

I wrote a letter on brotherhood because I had come to understand, just as many of you, that the authenticity of religious life can be found here. Without brotherhood, there can be no such thing as Church. Without brotherhood, there can be no such thing as religious life. It is not a question of engaging in some bland platitudes on forgiveness or mutual understanding; or even encouraging tolerance, however necessary that may be. The demands of brotherhood are much greater than this; it goes to the very heart of the Christian faith because we are « sons of the Son », and that makes brothers of us, as Origen once said. Forgiveness, mutual respect, the embrace of otherness, and mercy are what we

⁴³ Jean-Claude GUY, « La vie religieuse mémoire évangélique de l'Église », Le Centurion, 1987, p.154.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

propose to live. As our congregation becomes more international, it seeks to live out this reality with a concern for spiritual growth. The path to be taken is long and we are aware that the obstacles to brotherhood are many. The 33rd general chapter called on us to « underline the need to form religious to internationality and to interculturality ». The appeal that was made is loud and clear: « There is question here of passing from the fact that we have become in reality intercultural to a clear choice of being incultural, so that each of us can be more fully aware of the historical reality in which we find ourselves and so that the Congregation may make the choices necessary for its future. »⁴⁵ Moreover, there was a call to encourage formation to interculturality by organizing sessions, by providing opportunities to study abroad, etc.

Religious fraternity is different than other human fraternities by the fact that we are linked to one another, not simply in view of some work to be accomplished together, « but especially by a life to be lived that is definitively marked by complementarity and solidarity. And religious don't do it on the basis of a mutual choice or by some form of co-option, that is to say, some form of appointment that would exclude those with whom the group does not have some natural affinity, but by welcoming all those that the Lord has called to this kind of life and whom they welcome by virtue of such. Fraternity not by selection but by welcome, not chosen but received. »⁴⁶ My concrete experience leads me to say that we still have a long way to go in order to live out this intercultural brotherhood. I am convinced that we must go further in this formation and in this conversion.

⁴⁵ Acts of the General Chapter, 2017, « *New Wine into Fresh Wineskins: So That Jesus Christ may be Proclaimed to the Men and Women of Our Day* ». #47.

⁴⁶ Jean-Claude GUY, *op.cit.*, p.155.

- **Conversion to the world**

Ages past developed a theology of flight from the world, the *fuga mundi*, to talk about religious life as a pulling back from temporal realities. This goes back to John the Baptist and his life in the desert. But religious life is not a flight from the world; it is the proclamation of the Kingdom of God which is already here even if it yet to come. The whole idea of religious life finds its origin in the mission of Jesus who became incarnate to save us.

We are living in new times, the Chapter told us; the responses will be new as well. Our being present to the world must be developed so that we might better respond to the summons of the Spirit. We are in solidarity with the human condition and we can, by living shoulder to shoulder with our companions in the world around us, respond to their desires for a better life. We have spoken of the « digital continent » with a concern for the conservation of nature, for being nearer to the new « poor », for the current peripheries, etc. The places to be frequented, to be understood and to be loved that they may be saved are many. In fact, when I speak of « conversion to the world », it is a question of reflecting on the inculturation of religious life in the contemporary world. Inculturation helps us, as Fr. Pedro Arrupe thought, to express the Christian faith in today's culture and bring about a new creation in Christ. Therefore, we need new missionaries, new men, new women, new lay-people, new religious capable of profoundly loving the world. Religious life, « if it is seriously lacking in a real experience of the world where it is found, (...) will never become for this world the sign of the Kingdom to come. »⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Jean-Claude GUY, *op.cit.*, p.157.

CONCLUSION

At the conclusion of this letter, can it be my hope that you will have understood my visceral conviction? I am profoundly convinced that God continues to call and that he is also calling men and women to join our religious family, be that in religious life or in the Assumptionist Lay Alliance. It was my intention to outline an approach to vocations which shows that without us God's appeal has a hard time being heard in the world. Vocations are everyone's business. Vocation ministry is a must. Assumptionist selflessness is as vital as ever, but generosity goes hand in hand with the willingness to boldly issue the call. I wish to thank all my brothers and friends who in one way or another have not thrown up their hands and who continue to work for the Kingdom by having no fear to call the young and not so young to join us. I wish to thank those who « cast their nets » and pull nothing into their boat, but who stay at the helm nevertheless. God will not abandon us and the Assumption has not yet completed its course.

As we come to the end of this treatment, we Assumptionist religious, we can legitimately ask ourselves questions about our future. What vocation for the Augustinians of the Assumption? What future is opening up for us? I will give Jean-Claude Guy, a historian of religious life, the final word.

« A religious institute cannot rest on its vitality or its past achievements, but it must be in a permanent state of vocation, that is to say, of uncertainty and of availability before its future,

a vocation that it has never finished welcoming because it has never finished responding to it. »⁴⁸

Very Rev. Benoît GRIÈRE, A.A.
Superior general

July 11, 2020
Feast of Saint Benedict

⁴⁸ Jean-Claude GUY, *op.cit.*, p.154.

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