

WORKERS FOR THE KINGDOM TOGETHER!



**Letter # 9
to Religious and Lay Assumptionists
concerning the Alliance**

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Introduction

Dear Brothers and sisters,

At the 33rd general chapter, I was able to affirm that the Lay-religious Alliance is irreversible. I think it is important that I state at this moment, when we are right between two general chapters, the convictions which I hold.

During this year when we celebrate the 175th anniversary of the foundation of the Congregation, I find that it would be good to understand once again why, from the very beginning, Fr. d'Alzon believed that the Assumption was a common passion to be shared by religious and laity alike. Seeking the Kingdom of God is a loving endeavor that makes of all of us partners in a never-ending and ever renewed adventure.

I. Rekindling the flame

Almost everywhere the Alliance has taken off. Structures have been put in place for lay Assumptionists; there have been opportunities for formation, retreats have been organized regularly and numerous initiatives have seen the light of day. In spite of all this, I've noticed, among some, that there has often been a certain « loss of momentum, » even to the point of strongly questioning the meaning of their commitment. I think this is normal and that we shouldn't over-dramatise how people may begin to feel after several years of enthusiastic involvement. We need to remain confident and learn how, together, we might get

started once again. After a period of initial passion comes that of fidelity and it is this latter that has undoubtedly been put to the test in our world. Who can claim, in married life, in the consecrated life, or in any other commitment, that there have not been down times or moments of doubt? I believe that that individuals questioning their commitment to the Assumption are few in number but they need to be heard and given support. We must find concrete ways to show this support

How might we explain a decline in passion? Might we not look at what our own motivations are? Being tempted to abandon one's commitment can occur regularly. Whether we are bound by vows or by a promise, it would do us well to remind ourselves that our fidelity is fragile and that it is marked by doubt. The virtue of perseverance must be cultivated. Might it be that we haven't taken advantage of all the means at our disposal to grow in fidelity? The most recent document published by what used to be called the Congregation for Religious (which is now known as the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, CICLSAL, in its abbreviated form) is entitled: « The gift of fidelity. The joy of perseverance ». It makes the point that questions are arising everywhere on the solidity of religious commitments. So there is a urgent need to reflect on fidelity and perseverance, whether we be religious or lay.

I would invite everyone to reread the writings of the Biblical prophets, especially Hosea, Amos, Isaiah, and others as well. The love of God for his people is rarely repaid. The prophets communicate the word of God which invites one to rediscover one's first love, first passion, the flame of one's youth. Commitment cannot be understood except over time, that is to say, in a fidelity that is put to the test of time time and again. I don't worry about people's questioning, but it makes me deeply

unhappy to see how passion can be extinguished by failing to feed itself appropriately. Loving God and neighbor is truly the sign of the Kingdom that we can offer in the Alliance. And is this honored in fact? Are we agents of communion and reconciliation?

It also seems relevant to me that I should challenge my religious brothers in this regard. Do we really believe that the Alliance is a necessity for our Assumptionist Family? Are we artisans of the Alliance by seeking out lay vocations, but also by supporting them and forming them patiently and devotedly? It seems to me that certain brothers often have not accepted that the spirit of Emmanuel d'Alzon should drive us, make us determined to work with and for our lay brothers and sisters. In 2009, at the 1st international encounter of lay Assumptionists in Nîmes, addressing myself to them, I told them the following: *« In your own way, you have answered the call of the Spirit who invited you to join us in the proclamation of the Gospel. It is the same Spirit that spurs men and women to commit themselves in Assumptionist religious life as it is the one who spurs others to be lay Assumptionists. It is the same Spirit that inspired Emmanuel d'Alzon to found his Congregation as it is the one who impels you today to continue his work wherever you may be. So receive our thanks for having answered the call of the Spirit. Know this: without you we would lack an essential limb in the body of the Assumption, an essential dimension of our community life and apostolic work. We need you in order to answer the needs of the Gospel today. »*

Religious must recognize in the vocation of lay Assumptionists the same source of the call that is their own. I invite my Assumptionist brothers always to better integrate the presence of the laity in their concerns and to be leaven in the Alliance's growth. This might occur concretely by taking into account the lay-religious Alliance during the local chapter, for

example, by finding a time to share a moment with lay Assumptionists. Finally, the appointment of a religious to be responsible for the Alliance, whether at the provincial or local level, shouldn't dispense the other religious from showing concern for this great cause.

I would also invite all members of the Alliance to make their own the text entitled « Way of Life ». It is the only official text approved by the Congregation to convey the spirit with which each person is called to commit himself or herself. Better knowledge of this text and greater diffusion of it in our provinces are necessary if we are to build a solid Alliance.

II. The trial that the other poses

Getting involved opens us up to discovering that we are not the only ones walking along the way. Living side by side with others, our brothers and sisters, we discover that they're different. The confrontation with « otherness » is always a test and a grace at one and the same time. It is not good to be shaped by subjective criteria of affinity, but hopefully the Alliance will be open to diversity. Fraternity is the target we aim at when we engage in a commitment, but this can only be built by patiently exercising mercy and forgiveness. It is not any easier to live in religious community than it is in lay fraternity. Everyone must make progress in mutual understanding and acceptance of differences. A world that would be uniform and homogeneous would be sad and insipid. As St. Francis de Sales would say, we are called to live out « unidiversity », that is to say, unity in diversity. In our relations we are called to foster the discovery of complementarity. This is the source of much richness and happiness for those who know how to work for unity.

Religious experience community life with its joys and its sufferings. Without forgiveness, the common life is not possible. It is a true exercise in asceticism to be able to give and receive forgiveness. One can learn this by cultivating goodwill, patience and humility. Lay Assumptionists must also learn how to deepen the sense of mercy between themselves. The spirit of the Assumption spurns any hint of constituting groups based on exclusion or rejection of difference.

Finally, « otherness » also exists between laity and religious by virtue of the different vocations they each embrace. Even if the call may have the same source, the response is specific. Encountering and welcoming the two vocations will be fruitful in the measure that everyone makes an effort to destroy any bias or prejudice. There is no difference in dignity when it comes to vocations because they all have their source in baptism and the universal call to holiness. We are all children of God, brothers and sisters in Christ.

III. An international Alliance

The Alliance is growing locally in the various countries where we are present. It falls to the responsibility of the Province to make sure that, wherever it is possible, the Alliance may develop and may participate actively in Assumptionist life, both local and provincial. Being concerned for the building up of an Assumptionist laity is neither a minor nor peripheral mission among others in our provinces. The Alliance is already alive at the local level, but is called to open itself to the universal, that is to say to the internationality of the Congregation. The Alliance would suffer if groups of laity closed in upon themselves in their cultural or national particularities. This would run against the catholic spirit. I would invite each local group of the Alliance to reflect

concretely on the unity of all. It seems to me that, all the while respecting legitimate cultural differences, it is possible to show that the Alliance belongs to an international body. This might occur by having recourse to the same way of making a commitment (e.g. using the same formula for the promise) or by annual programs of common formation for the Alliance throughout the world.

IV. Responsibility and power

For a long time the Church has been confronted with clericalism. Assumptionist religious are not free of this tendency which seriously affects coresponsibility in community and harms fraternity. But neither is the laity spared from this quest for power. Clericalism exists everywhere and not just among the clergy. The attitude I support is not a flight from responsibility or a rejection of commitment. We need to organize ourselves and this takes place by means of structures of formation and government with people who accept various functions. The course we wish to embark upon is that of service and self-abandonment. Responsibilities exercised in an evangelical spirit are carried out by following Jesus Christ who gave his all for others. The desire to bear witness to the values of the Kingdom should also guide us in the current debates on the place of the laity and the recognition of the role of women.

V. Working for the Mission of the Church

We are living in a world where the Church is largely discredited. Often this discredit finds its origin in the different scandals which have affected it: pedophilia, abuses of power, clericalism, etc. But it may also be that people have overly

idealized the Institution. St. John XXIII liked to repeat, « The Church is holy but always in need of greater holiness ». In this way he was affirming that its journey on the earth is marked by setbacks and abuses that always call for forgiveness and the grace of God. An Assumptionist, lay or religious, must love the Church as she is....in order to change her, to be sure, but also in committing oneself concretely in this transformation. It is the story of conversion: our own and that of the human structures of the Church. Emmanuel d'Alzon left us an invincible love of the Church. It is, after Christ and the Virgin Mary, the object of our concern and our passion. It is not a question of idolizing the institution, but of rediscovering the community as Jesus desired it to be....a fraternity composed of men and women, of different status, of different choices, but united by one mind and one heart turned toward God, as Augustine added to the verse in the Acts of the Apostles. Loving the Church means working with her to proclaim the Gospel. The ecclesial community exists for the Kingdom. Therefore, everyone must be concretely involved in the mission of evangelization. Lay Assumptionists, together with Assumptionist religious, have a duty to respond to the needs of the world that both doubts and hopes. In spite of secularization, or even because of it, it is essential that we be signs of hope. The world cannot be reduced to the sole criteria of economic profit; it is called to be a universal fraternity reconciled in God and with others. The Assumption has apostolic priorities that are established at the Congregation's general chapters. The Church requests our support for various missions as well, as it did with maintaining our presence in Bulgaria. The parishes where we work also ask for good people for faith formation, visits to the elderly or to the sick, prison ministry, youth ministry, work with couples, etc. There is so much to do!

VI. Cultivating a spirit of prayer

We are men and women of faith. In spite of the difficulties of believing, which are legitimate and also stimulating since they challenge us always to develop our understanding of the faith, we are also called to bear witness to hope. We have to live out an intense relationship with the God of Jesus Christ and this relationship is built on prayer. Let us take the time to read the Word of God every day. Meditate on it and savor the wealth of this Word. Let us do our best as well to become contemplatives. The 'practice of the Presence of God', in Br. Lawrence's words, is essential; it is the breath of a Christian. Too often we are tempted to forget the need to frequent the oasis that refreshes and we are left thirsty as we cross the desert. God is the source of living waters and we need not go searching for water in « broken cisterns »; as the prophet Jeremiah writes (2:13): « Two evils my people have done: they have forsaken me, the source of living waters; they have dug themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water! »

The Alliance, as its name indicates, is a choice for the Kingdom of God that is lived out in an intense relationship with our Creator and Savior. It is God who proposes his Alliance with us and it is man who responds to his invitation. The Alliance is a story of love and, as in any love story, it requires time and space for intimacy. Prayer is one of those spaces.

The future of the Alliance

I am firmly confident in the future of the Alliance. It corresponds in a concrete fashion to the call to fraternity that we have received from Christ. The encyclical, *Tutti fratelli* (« Brothers,

All »), is a remarkable affirmation of the conviction that gives life to the Alliance. We continue on our way and we are ready to undertake new stages. The session that should have taken place this past July has been pushed back because of the COVID-19 virus. We hope to be able to organize it in 2021. Any number of proposals will undoubtedly be on the agenda. Already several lay Assumptionists are asking that the promise not be renewed every year but extended over several years. They are indicating their desire to make their commitment more definitive. Why not? But to do so, it will be necessary to spell out clearly the obligations that such a commitment would entail so that we can make it a reality. I would also like to see that local chapters of the Alliance be better organized with commitment ceremonies that are more clearly undertaken. We also have to improve formation. To do this, religious must be strongly encouraged to explore afresh sources of the Assumptionist charism so as to convey it better around them and especially to lay Assumptionists. These lay Assumptionists will also be invited to become formators, even of young religious, in order to demonstrate the common dignity of the baptized.

The future has not yet been marked out; that belongs to us. It will be our commitment, religious and lay together, that will allow us to advance on the way of the Kingdom. There is a world out there waiting for hope and love. Are we ready to work so that the world might discover the wealth of God's tenderness? The Alliance knows that it has a mission and that it is geared up for the Kingdom.

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

November 1st, 2020
Solemnity of All Saints

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