

**« DO NOT BE AFRAID ANY LONGER,
LITTLE FLOCK! »**

Lk 12:32



**Letter # 10
To our brothers in formation**

Cover illustration: "The Ascension", icon of the Community of Bose (Italy)

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Dear Brothers,

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced everyone to remain in his own country and community. What has been most devastating for men who are in solidarity with their fellow human beings is to see the ever-increasing number of victims across the world since the beginning of the epidemic's outbreak. There are already more than 3 million who have died and those ill with the virus are even more numerous. There is a real hope that a vaccination will help, but who will receive it? Probably the richest, those who are fortunate enough to live in the wealthiest countries; but the others, what will happen to them? The pandemic has changed our view of the world, and the priorities that we established with absolute certainty are often shattered. There are also the problems of insecurity notably afflicting our communities in North Kivu, but also that of Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso. The risks of abuse never go away and upset everyday life. Pandemic and insecurity are two realities affecting one or another of our houses of formation. In this context, Pope Francis' call inviting all men of goodwill to contribute to the emergence of a better world is to be taken seriously.

Today I address myself first of all to our brothers in formation but I hope that everyone in the Congregation will be able to benefit from reading this letter.

During my canonical visits I come to meet you and talk with you. That has given me an opportunity to discover your joys and your desires and to understand your questions as well, not to mention your doubts with regard to the future of the Church, of

religious life, and of the world. Reaching out to you today is a way for me to share what you are going through. Visits in person have for the most part been suspended and take place via the Internet. The exchange of ideas and discussions have been limited as a result of lockdown measures. Being formed for an apostolic religious life in this context is a real challenge. Nevertheless we can use this time of restrictions to reinforce the foundations that make of us new creatures enlivened by the Holy Spirit.

In this letter I would like to shore up your hope and encourage you to move forward. To do so, we will take a look at reality as it is so that we might better respond to the challenges before us.

Being aware of the present times

The uncertainty of the future

Saint Augustine, in his *Confessions*, has a beautiful meditation on time. In Book XI, he reminds us that there is only one single reality that is of concern to us, « The present of past things, the present of present things, and the present of future things (XI, 20, 26) ». So we are in the present and it is now that we must fully live the grace of the Kingdom of God. It is normal that in this health crisis we live with a certain fear. What will tomorrow be like? Do we have a future on this earth, scarred and sick as a result of the waste of natural resources (water, air, and land)? But there are also so many questions about the future of the Church. The ongoing crisis, that has been uncovered particularly with the issue of spiritual and sexual abuse, has profoundly upset many believers. The sociological indicators regarding the credibility of the Church are disturbing. Is the Church still relevant? The future ----and it is our Christian faith that leads me to say it ---- is open.

Nothing is beyond remedy or without hope. Insofar as we get involved in time, in the present, we can have an impact on the world and transform it according to God's plan. We have been given freedom so as to enable us to shape things in view of a better world. Sin would consist in resignation and fatalism. What's the use in acting, some say, if the world is condemned to failure? No, a future is possible. It is up to us to keep that future open. With Christ, we affirm that salvation is already won.

Triumphant secularization

The context in which we live is undoubtedly one of the secularization of societies and behavior. To be sure, the West is already in an advanced stage of secularization, but it would be illusory to believe that the rest of the world will be spared. We are already seeing the signs of change in the more traditional societies of Africa and Asia. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said more than 80 years ago, the world behaves as if God did not exist : « *Etsi Deus non daretur* ». "We can't be honest if we don't recognize that we must live in a world – *etsi deus non daretur* (...). As we grow up, we are led to recognize more truly our situation before God. God makes us understand that we need to live as men who have come to live without God. The God who is with us *is the same one who* abandons us (Mk 15:34)! The God who lets us live in the world, without the working hypothesis of a God, is the one before whom we constantly stand. Before God and with God, we live without God. God allows himself to be dislodged from the world and nailed to the cross. God is powerless and weak in the world and only as such is he with us and helps us. »¹

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, « Résistance et soumission (*Resistance and Submission*) », Labor et Fides, 1973, pp.366-367.

In this statement Dietrich Bonhoeffer did not endorse some kind of « death of God », following the example of Friedrich Nietzsche several decades earlier. He was showing that the world, « having grown up », could dispense with the hypothesis of a God by finding answers to questions about the universe. But the strong affirmation of Bonhoeffer is that man continues « to stand constantly before God. ». Faith remains possible for a man who grows up, but his faith must also be ‘grown up’ and responsible. God is always with us.

A young religious today must learn to live « before God » with the conviction that He will never abandon him. But he must accept a world that does not believe spontaneously. An adult faith is our horizon so that we might be authentic apostles of the Gospel. Secularization, in that way, can present itself as an opportunity to grow in one’s faith. An active adult faith has a power to transform the world as it once did and still does if men and women accept to consecrate their entire lives to this enterprise. A religious is that ‘new creature’ who risks everything on Christ, « the Way, the Truth, and the Life ».

In fact, the observation that secularization is rapidly taking root in our societies shouldn’t plunge us into a chasm of confusion or inhibit us from acting. Looking at things as they are does not mean being afraid to act. One must understand reality and engage in reflection in order to see how one is to evangelize. There are probably opportunities to announce, once more, freedom in Jesus Christ, the Good News for men and women of our time.

Abandoning the dream of a perfect community

Once again I draw my inspiration from the rich thought of the theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He had an experience of

community within the Confessing Church of Germany. In order to liberate himself from the institutional model of the Protestant churches who had compromised themselves with the rise of Nazism, he chose to live in a lay community. Bonhoeffer insists on the need not to idealize community. He recalls quite rightly that « Christian fraternity is not a human ideal, but a reality given by God ». Therefore, we must learn to 'de-idealize' community so that we might see in it a reality where disappointment is present at certain times. « So that God might make us understand what authentic Christian community is, it may even be necessary that we be disappointed, disappointed in others, disappointed in ourselves. » Such language, it has to be admitted, is quite jarring but it allows us to recover a sound evangelical sense where forgiveness and reconciliation are at work. « That is why it is only the community which does not fear the disappointment it will inevitably experience in acknowledging all of its flaws that will begin to be that which God wants it to be and will grasp by faith the promise offered to it. »²

Sometimes we're disappointed by our community life. But this is entirely normal. There is no such thing as an ideal community. There are communities that are seeking the Kingdom and this is accomplished by groping, stumbling, falling down and picking oneself up again. One must be forgiving, patient, and willing to cultivate a good sense of humor.

At the Assumption we love fraternal life in community. It is a place where truth can be found and where progress can be made. Demands are there, but we're always called to remember what

² Dietrich BONHÖFFER, « De la vie communautaire » (Life Together), Éditions du Cerf/Labor et Fides ; 1983 ; pages 21-22.

our Rule of Life says, « We must constantly transcend our divisions and limitations so that we can learn to accept and forgive each other. » (#8)

Putting an end to clericalism

Are we threatened by the snares of clericalism and its numerous temptations? The question has to be asked and we need to look at it with our eyes open. My more than ten years of experience as head of the Congregation and the review of numerous dossiers of requests for final vows and ordination to the diaconate and priesthood allow me to say in no uncertain terms that clericalism exists everywhere, including among the young.

The image that we have of our own vocation is still too often marked by the almost exclusive desire to become a priest. Being called to religious life is secondary, indeed quite diminished vis-à-vis the goal that is really sought out, i.e. ordination. A priest myself, I am happy to live out the sacrament of Holy Orders. This ministry is not some kind of reward: it is a service for the Kingdom. Too often the theology of ministry that we have adopted is not sufficiently supported by the Scriptures and remains quite deficient with regard to the assimilation of the texts of the official Magisterium, especially the documents of Vatican II. What follows appears time and again in the requests of certain brothers, « I want to become a deacon because the ministries of lector and acolyte (still wrongly called, by many, *minor orders*) do not allow me to develop my calling. » Once he is a deacon, the same person expresses his regret that he cannot hear Confessions or say Mass... Being a priest...that's what he is seeking, but a priest understood as in the priesthood of old, the 'man of the sacred' and separated from mere mortals. All of this is at the root of a harmful

clericalism. We need to do away with that vocabulary of ours which speaks of the priestly orders and return to the Gospel idea of service for the Kingdom. The Assumption is well equipped for this thanks to its mystique of the Kingdom and of its universal mission. Religious life is not at its core hierarchical. It is « the Church's gospel memory » (from the title of a book by Fr. Jean-Claude Guy, SJ in 1987); as such, it bears witness to fraternity, communion, and unity. We are built into a people and the only priest is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. All others are ministers of the grace shared by the Son. We exist in order to bear witness. I am fond of recalling what Paul Ricœur wrote so that I might be led to understand things better: « *The original authority of the Scriptures and of the Church is nothing other than that of witness. Witness coerces no one* ». In this way Ricœur is reacting against the « *clerical violence that perverts the non-coercive authority of the Word* ». It is good to remember this call to be missionaries, to be witnesses of the Word, servants of the Beatitudes. Faith is an invitation to freedom. We are the servants of this freedom and we work for all forms of liberation for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

Clericalism is the ground which gave rise to spiritual abuses and sexual abuses. We have an obligation to be particularly vigilant. Our life in community demands of us that we be attentive to the life of our brothers. Our vocation obliges us to be in solidarity with the least among us, with the weakest, and with those who are threatened because of their own vulnerability. I like to say that religious life is based on mutual trust. We look out for each other's growth. Vigilance is not some kind of unhealthy surveillance, but is a means of support in getting us through difficult times in our lives. When doubts, fears, and questions arise, we are fortunate to have brothers at our side.

God, our strength and our life

Religious life offers us an adventure that fills the human heart. The attitudes that Fr. d'Alzon recommended remain the best means to achieve such happiness.....availability, generosity, boldness, a sense of unity and of forgiveness, a search for the common good, etc. The Assumption is our family. We are called to flourish here, to grow and to bear fruit for the Gospel.

The gift of fidelity and the joy of perseverance

Recently the Vatican dicastery responsible for religious life (CICLSAL) published a text with the above-mentioned title. We are well aware that the gift of fidelity is precious and all of us have been affected during our formation years by the departure of brothers whom we loved and respected. Often we thought that these brothers had a strong faith and a solid vocation, even more solid than our own. Why leave then? What discomfort pushed them to abandon their vows? There are no easy answers. A wide range of reasons is possible and we have found a great variety in the causes given: loss of faith, uneasiness with authority, the lack of a 'sister soul' in one's affective life, fear of the future, difficulty in living out the religious vows...

Every departure should be an occasion for those who stay to deepen the bond that unites them to Christ. To choose religious life is not a choice of a lifestyle, of an ideology, or of a view of the world. First and foremost it is the choice of following a person whose voice we have heard: Jesus. The Lord is our life's companion and it is He who gives us the joy of serving. Deepening this personal relationship with Christ is the principal objective of formation and of the life of every religious. It is in the measure that we live in perseverance that we experience joy. Perseverance is at

one and the same time the fruit of God's grace that gives us the strength to move forward day in and day out and the fruit of a conversion to evangelical love. It is God who is faithful and who gives us the grace to be faithful as well.

A passion for understanding the faith

An Assumptionist must be ready « to give a reason for his hope » (1 Pt 3:15). Such a goal requires a solid intellectual formation that gives everyone the ability to find his bearings in the world and to contribute to discussions with all who wish to find meaning for their lives. Academic formation, together with spiritual and apostolic formation, is necessary; as a matter of fact it is indispensable. When, in my report for the 33rd general chapter, I spoke of the « idolatry of academic degrees » as a threat for the Assumption, I wasn't understood. Nevertheless, I maintain what I said without hesitation. An unconditional love for academic degrees is not healthy. It does not correspond to what Fr. d'Alzon was asking for when he said that study must always be a priority at the Assumption. Idolatry confuses the end and the means. The end is the coming of the Kingdom; the means consist, for one thing, in a solid academic formation, including the acquisition of degrees, which recognize the value of work accomplished. But at times there are degrees that are not placed at the service of the extension of the Kingdom and this is a sin.

What is most important is acquiring a solid formation with depth in theology, philosophy and the entire array of religious disciplines. The Assumption needs scholars in the Scriptures, systematic theology, patristics, philosophy, moral theology, etc. I call on every religious in formation to allow himself to be challenged by his superiors and his formators so as to be willing to study those disciplines that are priorities in responding to our

apostolic mission. This will entail dialogue, but especially an openness to the Spirit who never ceases to push us further in our practice of obedience.

God's adventurers

Religious life gives us an extraordinary opportunity, that is, the ability to seek God together in community. By now the world has been explored on every continent. Unknown regions no longer exist. Science and its extraordinary discoveries have changed our view of the world. It has often been « de-mystified »; in spite of everything, it still remains a mystery for many. Religious life remains a possible adventure in these turbulent and complex times, one of the few adventures in which we can involve both body and soul. God continues to call men and women to follow him. He is there right at our side to help us advance along the road of the Kingdom. The world has become secularized, but, for those who really want to ask themselves existential questions, the mystery remains. Who am I? What is my destiny? Where are we going?

The Assumption does not pretend to have an answer to all these questions. But it does have a vision: that of allowing the men of our times to live as brothers and to seek together how to build a civilization based on love, peace, justice, and law. For the Congregation a young religious represents a sign of renewal and of hope. He arrives with the joy and the fervor of youth to join the ranks of elders who work faithfully for the Lord's harvest.

Being a seeker of God means having an attitude of humility and openness. We are on the way and we know that we don't have ready-made truth. This truth has a proper name: Jésus. He can be discovered in the Scriptures and in the sacraments, especially the

Eucharist, but also in what we share with our brothers. We are seekers of God's Kingdom. Jesus came to inaugurate it, but we know that we can't possess it fully until we have entered eternal life. Our sojourn on this earth is a journey that allows us to pass from ephemeral and earthly realities to eternal and heavenly ones. Everything that has the savor of eternity contributes to the Kingdom. It is love alone that gives access to the fullness of life.

A Church in dialogue with the world

The German philosopher, Hans Joas, has been working on secularization for many years. His reflections attenuate the often peremptory observations made on the inexorable quality of its progression in the world. In his opinion the world is experiencing an epochal change but he disputes the opinion that holds that the theory of secularization inevitably entails the disappearance of the religious in societies. The modernity of the world does not mean that progress necessarily consists in the end of the religious. Faith is an option, as the title of one of his latest books conveys³. The author distinguishes four challenges for Christianity: to develop a universalist ethic of love capable of responding to the different forms of individualism; to defend the person against the return of a reductionistic view of man that is both naturalistic and scientific; to maintain a strong spirituality with a community dimension where the Church is « a community that makes individuality possible »; to recall the idea of transcendence against all phenomena of totalitarian self-sacralization. I believe that we would do well to read this philosopher and that we as a

³ Hans Joas, "La foi comme option", Salvator, 2021/*Faith as an Option: Possible Futures for Christianity*, Stanford University Press, 2014. Joas is currently a professor at the University of Chicago.

Congregation, open to the world, might be able to address some of the challenges he identifies.

To do so, we must return to the teaching of Paul VI in the encyclical « *Ecclesiam suam*: « The Church must enter into dialogue with the world in which it lives. It has something to say, a message to give, a communication to make. »⁴

Heirs of St. Augustine and of Emmanuel d'Alzon.

It is the same spirit that pushed Emmanuel d'Alzon to found the Assumption that draws young people today to join our religious family. Are we aware of this force that enlivens us as it enlivened our beloved founder? The Holy Spirit works in our hearts and enables us to do more than we could dare to do without him. It is important that we be familiar with our sources and draw from them regularly. A young Assumptionist has a vocation to be impassioned by his spiritual guides, namely, Augustine and d'Alzon. I would like to see more of a « loving » passion for our founder and patriarch. Knowledge of our sources is too often skin-deep and too weak.. The Assumption charism is alive to the extent that we put it into practice in our apostolic life and in our inner life.

Hope at the heart of our life

You know that I am fond of repeating, in season and out of season, that the Assumption hasn't spoken its last word. It is my profound conviction that our small religious family remains fully relevant in the world and the Church. « The Assumptionist community exists for the coming of the Kingdom » (Rule of Life

⁴ Paul VI, *Ecclesiam suam*, #65, August 6 1964.

#4). As long as the Kingdom is not fully manifest, there is work to be done for men who are bold, generous, and selfless. There is a mystique that surrounds mission at the Assumption and I urge each of you to deepen this passion for the Kingdom. What is it that we have to do, that we must live? Let us keep on coming back to the Gospel and listening to what the Lord says, « Instead, seek his kingdom..... Do not be afraid any longer, little flock, for your Father is pleased to give you the kingdom. » (Lk 12: 31-32)

Dear brothers, I am finishing the writing of this letter during Eastertide, the time when we celebrate the light of the Resurrection and the one who gives us life in its fullness. It is also the time when we await the coming of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is present in our lives to help us discover the Kingdom and the fullness of love of God and of neighbor. The Assumption thanks God for the young men who come to join its ranks in order to proclaim the Good News.

Rome, April 25, 2021
Good Shepherd Sunday
Day of Prayer for Vocations

Very Rev. Benoît GRIÈRE, A.A.

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