



ASSUMPTIONIST EDUCATORS UNITE

BY TROY WATKINS

COLLEGE HOSTS HISTORIC CONFERENCE

They came from around the world, each with their own experiences and traditions, but sharing faith and a commitment to the teachings of the Venerable Father Emmanuel d’Alzon, founder of the Augustinians of the Assumption. For 10 days a diverse group of teachers and administrators from Assumptionist institutions from across the globe engaged in spirited discussion, careful study and a sharing of stories and challenges. In the end they emerged stronger, refreshed and recommitted to advancing Fr. d’Alzon’s vision for education; to help their students discover what it means to lead their best lives.

Nearly 70 educators gathered in July at the College for the Assumptionists’ inaugural Educational Congress to reinvigorate themselves with Father d’Alzon’s vision of education and fully integrate his teachings into their individual institutional missions.

They represented 20 schools on four continents, all established by Assumptionists or Oblate Sisters of the Assumption, and traveled from a myriad of countries, including Argentina, Belgium, Burkina Faso, Chile, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, France, Kenya, Madagascar and Tanzania.

STRENGTHENING THE FOUNDATION

“The question,” Fr. John Franck, A.A. ’70, assistant general of the Assumptionist order and organizer of the Educational Congress, explained, “was how do we recapture in the 21st century the original genius and insight of Fr. d’Alzon? What was he trying to address in the wake of the French Revolution and all that was taking place at the end of the 18th century? How did he see education and which of his insights are still applicable in a globalized world in the 21st century?”

According to Fr. Franck, a former

Assumption College vice president of student affairs, the historic event was some eight years in the making. Driven by the belief that there was a need to focus on education across the entire congregation, planning and support for the conference began with former superiors Fr. Richard Lamoureux, A.A. ’64 and Sr. Claire Rabitz, O.A., and was continued by current superiors Fr. Benoît Grière, A.A. and Sr. Felicia Ghiorghies, O.A.

With more than 20 high schools and colleges, of various types speaking different languages scattered across four continents, attending, the logistics of organizing and executing such an event was daunting. To its organizers, however, the difficulty was well worth it.

“We found that in some areas we were sort of losing the spirit,” Fr. Franck explained. “In Africa and South America there was a new emphasis on education where they were rediscovering the dimension of who we are as Assumptionists and they agreed that an



Guest speaker Mary Ann Glendon, Ph.D., former U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See



Though they hail from many lands, Assumptionist educators share a unique bond through their mission and teaching style, a bond the conference strove to strengthen.

investment was needed, so they built high schools in Africa and South America. However, they questioned whether or not they had the foundation to inspire their work with d'Alzon's original vision. So the superiors agreed that the need was apparent."

Fr. Dennis Gallagher, A.A. '69, Assumption's vice president for mission, shared that Fr. Richard was hearing from young Assumptionists about their interest in education during his travels abroad. Fr. Franck explained that it made the most sense for the College to host the event due to its resources, size and desire to do so. "We were eager to expose so many connected to our Assumptionist educational institutions worldwide to a place about which they have heard much, but of which they had little, or in most case, no experience," he said. "To literally see the face of Assumption in its educational apostolate throughout the world was certainly exciting."

A CONGREGATION THAT MINISTERS TO THE WORLD

Assumptionist educators date to the French Revolution and the teachings of Fr. d'Alzon, then the vicar general of the Diocese of Nîmes. Fr. d'Alzon believed that ignorance of faith was responsible for the troubled state of the world in the years following the French Revolution and, convinced that the world's intellectual crisis was at the heart of its social and political crises, he was inspired to found two religious congregations (the Assumptionists and the Oblate Sisters) that would advance the Kingdom of God through "education in all its forms."

Since its founding as a religious order by Fr. d'Alzon in 1845, the Augustinians of the Assumption and the Oblate Sisters of the Assumption have established more than 90 educational facilities, including more than 20 secondary schools and colleges, as well as more than 70 primary schools, across four continents, including its only institution of higher learning in the Americas, Assumption College.

EMBRACING THE TIMES

Fr. d'Alzon's passion for education was inspired by his desire to respond to the intellectual, moral and spiritual challenges posed by his times. According to Fr. Franck, the challenges faced by Assumptionist institutions today differ greatly depending on their location.

"In the Western world," he explained, "we have an issue with secularization and a mindset that indicates 'education is for a career, not for life.' Of course you need to provide people with a means to earn a living, but education in the traditional Christian university was 'how do you live the good life?' In today's world, universities are more focused on the utilitarian and careerist emphasis and it's losing the broader perspective that we are here to train the whole person."

Other places have different concerns. According to Fr. Franck, in Madagascar, for instance, the Assumptionists operate the only high school in the rural southern part of the

country, and are having trouble convincing parents that an education is important for their future success.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where there are six Assumptionist high schools and one university, the major issue is security. “They are having problems surviving,” said Franck. “The constant attacks of armed groups has created intense pressure.”

with the group how their institution currently implements and embodies the principles of Fr. d’Alzon, both as individuals and as a whole, and discussed how to further those aims. Participants also listened to presentations, offered in English, French and Spanish, focusing on different aspects of Fr. d’Alzon’s life, his teachings, and his historical context. They also examined writings from d’Alzon’s extensive collection.

The presentations covered a wide variety of topics and subject matter. A presentation of d’Alzon’s vision for education was led by Br. Jean-Michel Brochec, A.A., superior of the Assumptionist community in Nîmes, France; Fr. Tomás Gonzalez, A.A., Colegio Emmanuel d’Alzon, Bogotá, Colombia and **Fr. Richard Lamoureux, A.A.** ’64. Mary Ann Glendon, Ph.D., a professor of law at Harvard University and the former United States ambassador to the Holy See, discussed “The Challenges facing the Church, and Educators in particular, in the Globalized World of the 21st century.” Sr. Claire Rabitz, the former superior general of the Oblate Sisters, spoke about the social, political and historical challenges Fr. d’Alzon faced. Other presentations focused on additional key issues facing Assumptionist educators.

From those exercises, the group worked together to identify the core elements of d’Alzon’s educational vision. They discussed matters ranging from faith to social responsibility to the philosophy of teaching, seeking to ascertain what makes d’Alzon’s vision so unique – and essential.

Through the course of the conference the participants came to better understand that, for d’Alzon, education sought to truly lift up students, to foster genuine happiness and promote the true dignity of the human person. He believed that knowing Jesus Christ lay at the center of a successful, meaningful life, and that to truly know Christ is to love him and imitate him, and to love all of his brothers and sisters made in the image and likeness of God.

d’Alzon knew that, in order to establish a firm foundation for living the best kind of human life, students must build and edify their mind, body, spirit and soul. Versed in and animated by the Catholic intellectual tradition, he engaged in serious dialogue with people of other faiths and of no faith tradition and placed going out into the world

and helping others as paramount to a life well-lived.

For the assembled educators, who had gathered from many nations with the abiding desire to build a better world and light the way for their pupils, the conference helped them learn a great deal but also reaffirmed what they already knew by heart: that the core of d’Alzon’s vision is the wish to embrace truth in all its forms and to pass on that truth to others, inspiring them to do good in the world – wherever their path might take them.

RETURNING TO THE WORLD

At the conclusion of the conference the participants identified nearly 30 recommended actions to implement going forward, and offered suggestions as to what they needed from the Congregations in support of their work. Proposals included the creation of more collaborative efforts among the Congregation, sharing Assumption education methods and teachings with more groups outside of the Congregation and focusing reach-out efforts to assist sister schools.

“The schools in South America hadn’t been together, but are forming an association,” Fr. Franck noted. “The schools in Africa are going to have a training session about education as a result of the conference.”

Through the conference Assumption College strengthened its partnership with the Democratic Republic of the Congo’s Institut Supérieur Emmanuel d’Alzon de Butembo, located in North Kivu, and is helping the institution with its strategic planning over the next 10 years. Representatives from both schools met in person at the event to discuss how they can support one another.

These are just a few examples of how this event will help to integrate Fr. d’Alzon’s vision across the many schools he inspired.

“My sense is that the conference attendees were inspired,” said Franck. “It helped them understand that this is a worthwhile endeavor, based on the resources that have been invested, and with how scattered our institutions are across four continents, it helped them to feel connected to the rest of the Congregation.”

Separated by distance but united by faith and creed, the Assumptionist educators departed the College enlivened by the Congress and eager to take with them what they learned as they continue the good works of Fr. d’Alzon. ❖

THOUGH THEY HAIL FROM MANY LANDS, ASSUMPTIONIST EDUCATORS SHARE A UNIQUE BOND THROUGH THEIR MISSION AND TEACHING STYLE, A BOND THE CONFERENCE STROVE TO STRENGTHEN.

In March, Assumptionist priest Fr. Vincent Machozi, the founder of an informational website documenting the ongoing violence in the North Kivu province of the DRC, was murdered by armed gunmen, shortly after he had posted an article denouncing the presidents of the DRC and Rwanda and their role in recent massacres affecting the region.

“The challenges around the world were multiple so we went back to what Fr. d’Alzon was trying to address as a common element,” Franck stated.

THE CONGRESS’S LESSONS

The Conference program was aligned with the classic steps of Catholic reflection: observation, evaluation and action. Representatives from each school shared

Father d'Alzon's vision



Fr. d'Alzon envisioned educational institutions committed to the pursuit of truth and academic excellence through a dialogue between faith and reason. He sought the development of the whole person and wanted students to grow in the knowledge of the human condition.

Time has not dimmed Fr. d'Alzon's message or mission; his commitment to the pursuit of truth is reflected through his congregation's embrace of the Catholic intellectual tradition and his devotion to compassion and charity is embodied by its commitment to service.

The seven elements of d'Alzon's educational vision

1 ❖ FAITH

d'Alzon taught a faith that was focused on the essentials: he wanted his students to be "simply Catholic." Faith, hope and charity were the virtues on which he most insisted. He tried to instill in his students and teachers a love for the Church that was at once heart-felt, adult and intelligent.

2 ❖ EDUCATING

Knowing and loving the world was essential in order to bring it to the liberating message of Jesus Christ in words it could understand. Faced with an ignorance of the faith as well as growing indifference to faith and outright unbelief, d'Alzon believed that "if the world were not to fall apart" it needed to be penetrated through and through with a Christian idea.

3 ❖ FAMILY SPIRIT

d'Alzon desired to promote a family spirit in the school, allowing students could become the most fully developed and committed individuals possible. This "family spirit" was characterized by trust, openness, generosity,

honestly, and simplicity of relationships. Far from being merely a vague sentiment, genuine family spirit implied an ongoing search for unity, an attentiveness to each person, deep friendship and community (as defined by St. Augustine: "one heart and one mind intent on God").

4 ❖ STUDENTS

Students should be men and women who were made truly free by understanding and embracing the truth – the truth about God and about themselves, about God as Creator and about themselves as creatures, known, loved, and redeemed by him, according to d'Alzon. His students would be people of character, filled with a faith that was intelligent, studied, deep and authentic. They would be men and women capable of transforming the world based on their solid convictions and present at every level of society.

5 ❖ TEACHERS

d'Alzon wanted teachers to not only impart knowledge but to aid in shaping the souls of

their students. He fostered in them a sense of vocation, and wanted them to be both professionally competent and pedagogically creative. Above all, however, he sought to ensure they were personally committed to a life of faith, to the mission of the institution and to the well-being of each student.

6 ❖ TEACHING

Students of every age, character and class were welcomed by d'Alzon and were prepared specially to accompany those in greatest need. He sought to provide all with an education that would develop to the fullest the particular talents of each individual student.

7 ❖ SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

d'Alzon instilled in his students a strong sense of social responsibility, inspired by the social thought of St. Augustine. He provided them with an opportunity to render service to the needy in Nîmes, but also reflected with them on the meaning of this service. ❖