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Christ Is My Life

The Spiritual Legacy of Emmanuel d'Alzon

By André Sève, A. A.

Translated by M. Angeline Bouchard

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My Life with Jesus

by André Sève, A. A.

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by André Sève, A. A.

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by Emmanuel d'Alzon

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PREFACE

The English speaking world is becoming acquainted with André Sève, of the Augustinians of the Assumption, through the publication by *New City Press* of two of his books in translation. This best-selling author is one of the outstanding spiritual writers in France today. A journalist by trade, he first gained popularity through film reviews and interviews of famous people. A few years ago, he was sent on assignment to report on Father Cafarel’s famous house of prayer outside of Paris. Reluctant at first, he soon became interested and then involved. The experience changed the way he prayed and eventually changed his life. He wrote a book on

meditation,

Thirty Minutes for God, which

has sold over one hundred thousand copies. Since that time, prayer has emerged as his favorite topic. In his crisp, journalistic style, he writes simply and profoundly about our dialogue with God.

When the Assumptionists celebrated the anniversary of their founder's death, he was inspired to write a book on one of the spiritual masters of the nineteenth century: Emmanuel d'Alzon (1810-1880). During the course of his work, he was often tempted to abandon the project because of its difficulty. As much as he loved the founder of the Augustinians of the Assumption, he felt that some of the topics Father d'Alzon stressed, such as the importance he gives to suffering, were real stumbling blocks for him. He also struggled with the founder's nineteenth century way of expressing himself. Father Sève wrestled with these problems for a long time and overcame them. It is a credit to the way he works that he was able finally to use the problems as a means of reaching a deeper understanding of his subject.

Father Sève has chosen to play the role of guide through the writings of Father d'Alzon. His book is not intended to be a learned biography. Instead, he uses the skills of his trade: his power of observation and his ability to get to what is essential in a person's life and writings. The result is an exciting book on an important figure of the last century. *Christ Is My Life* makes it easy for us to meet a man of great depth who influenced the Church and the world of his time. He enriched both with two religious families that continue to work in his spirit for the extension of the Kingdom of God in some twenty-five different countries throughout the world.

This book will obviously be welcomed not only by his spiritual sons and daughters, but also by those with whom they work and by the people they serve. However, the book will also be of interest to anyone wanting to meet a man of great spiritual stature. The primacy he gives to the supernatural, his love of Christ, his Trinitarian spirituality, his commitment to active contemplation, the attention he gives to the rights of God, his dedication to study, and his zeal for the Kingdom of God are a source of inspiration for anyone interested in the renewal of the Church today.

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CHAPTER I

1810 - 1880

He made his own honey,

but with the season's flowers.

Father Emmanuel d'Alzon's life (1810-1880) spanned most of the 19th century. We who live in the late 20th century may find it hard to imagine what it meant for a man to be born twenty years after the French Revolution and to live in the France of 1830 and 1848. Yet now as then, to use one of his favorite expressions, we are witnessing the end of one world and the shaping of another.

The history of 19th-century France was cut in two by 1848, and so was Father d'Alzon's own life. He had to let go of his secure world and press forward without quite knowing where he was going. Amid changes and uncertainties he remained free, fettered neither to nostalgic dreams nor to new trends. In this he is an example for us and has much to teach us.

Judging from the way he spoke about the French Revolution of 1789, we can readily see that, like many others of his milieu, he could have chosen to cling to the past amid regrets and a sense of horror. As a child from the age of 6 to 13, he had lived at Lavagnac, in one of the great chateaux of the Hérault region of Southern France, surrounded by a magnificent park. His family name and motto proclaimed heroic faith: the Daudé d'Alzons declared they were "*Deo dati,*"
gi
ven to God. Their ancestral coat of arms was blood-red, with a crowned lion holding a lily, symbols of God and the king, exploding energy and a proud bloodline. It was a call to arms. Emmanuel listened passionately to the chronicles of the wars of religion in the Cévennes Mountains during which one of the Daudés had been killed by the Camisards along with the uncle of the knight of Assas.

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Then there were the bloodcurdling accounts of the Revolution, the guillotine, the great fires, the hunted priests, and the imprisonment of his grandparents. He lived in an atmosphere dominated by fear of disorder and yearning for the past.

The spirit of combat! While a student in Paris he confided to his father that he believed it was his vocation to enter Saint-Cyr, the French "West Point." Though he later renounced this aspiration, he retained a military dimension in his thinking and writing. He would come to see the Pope as the commander in chief and the bishops as his colonels. He would say that prayer "forms soldiers ready at the first sound of the bugle to take up arms and fight God's battles."¹

He was soon deeply involved in these spiritual battles. As a student he enrolled in the *Association for the defense of the Catholic religion*.

The word "defense" reveals the tenor of the epoch. Catholics would continue for a long time to think of themselves as "beleaguered." This tells us a great deal about the young Emmanuel.

He also attended the *Conférence religieuse* where he met the controversial French philosopher

and theologian Félicité de Lamennais (1785-1854). D'Alzon was fascinated. This was his first jolting encounter with new ideas, his first vision of a Church which was not turning its back on "modern" society.

The thought of defending religion led d'Alzon to a decision that would astonish his friends: "Do I frighten you wearing a priest's cassock? Well, I have thought it over very carefully." He returned to Lavagnac where he studied on his own for two years. Then he entered the seminary in Montpellier and completed his theological training in Rome, where he had a second jolting encounter. He would remain an unconditional supporter of the Pope throughout his life.

To Fight And To Create

Ordained at the age of 24, Father d'Alzon offered his services to the bishop of Nîmes because that city was the stronghold of the Protestants in southern France. To fight! He threw himself at once into the fray. For a while he even had thoughts of bringing the French Protestants back to Rome, just as Newman whom he greatly admired wanted to do for the Anglicans. D'Alzon put his trust in education. That was his way of fighting. Until the end of his life when the fight would be waged by the Catholic press, Father d'Alzon was to be an educator. For him absolutely all apostolic action must consist in teaching the faith.

Upon his arrival in Nîmes, Father d'Alzon hurled himself furiously into preaching and catechetics: "I am the teacher of nearly all the children of Nîmes from the ages of 12 to 15." During this flurry of activity, he bought a bankrupt school in 1844, *Our Lady of the Assumption*. There he began another fight: the fight for freedom of education.

Three years earlier Mother Marie Eugénie of Jesus, foundress of the Religious of the Assumption (this name certainly seems to have been a sign), had asked Father d'Alzon to be her spiritual director. Through their relationship he came to know her newly-formed teaching congregation and he liked its spirit. The next step for him was the founding of a similar society for men.

In September, 1845, the *Association of the Assumption* was launched in a modest way, but even the most humble beginnings never frightened him. This organization carried out one of his cherished ideas, the grouping of priests and laymen. At the start there were nine of them in all. Christmas marked the beginning of the novitiate for the new congregation and the beginning of its third order. Five years later (five long years that tore at his nerves), at Christmas, 1850, the Assumptionists came into being officially. Father d'Alzon and four other religious made their public vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience.

Years of crisis followed. Father d'Alzon wore himself out handling the responsibilities of the diocese of Nîmes, whose bishop fell ill and subsequently died. Moreover, all kinds of trials descended upon him: lack of financial resources, a dearth of vocations, criticisms, ill health. In 1857 the dark clouds finally broke. Three great beginnings would now mark Assumption's rapid growth. In 1862, he launched the Mission of the Orient (Bulgaria and Turkey), and founded a women's congregation, the Oblates of the Assumption, composed of hardy, zealous women missionaries to assist in this program.

In 1871, disheartened because his congregation consisted only of a headquarters devoid of troops, Father d'Alzon jumped at an offer to take over a dilapidated, dungeon-like Château in Savoy. He planned to use it as a base for seeking vocations among the common people. The building was soon transformed into a minor seminary to be called an "*alumnate*" or juniorate. Here, under circumstances of unbelievable poverty, the sons of workers and peasants were accepted. The "alumnates" or juniorates soon provided many candidates for the novitiates, transforming the Congregation of the Assumption into an innovative world where sons of peasants and industrial workers were given an opportunity to enter the religious life and to have the benefits of higher education under the guidance of the most blue-blooded of aristocrats.

Father d'Alzon's third achievement was the establishment of a team of Assumptionists in Paris. This small but enterprising group carried out one of Father d'Alzon's ideas by launching the Association of Our Lady of Salvation at No. 8 rue François-Ier. From this organization were to emerge two other projects which would put their mark on the congregation: the great national pilgrimages and the publishing house *Bonne Presse*. The latter published *le Pèlerin* and *la Croix*, soon to be followed by a series of periodicals for children.

When Father d'Alzon died in 1880 there were only 63 Assumptionist religious, but in their 14 residences they carried on 92 programs of various sorts! He had given them a spirit of bold creativity dedicated to one idea, expressing one cry of love: *Thy Kingdom come!*

The Problem Of Idiom

The purpose of this book is to reveal the spirituality of Father d'Alzon. It is less a biography than an essay limited in scope and yet ambitious. It seeks to sort out the essential ideas of a spiritual leader of the 19th century and to give him a chance to speak to our times. If this were a work of historical research everything would be discerned and clarified in the context of the history of spirituality, familiarity with that particular epoch, inquiry into various influences, and the extensive use of quotations and footnotes. I do not have the competence to do such a piece of work and so I have fallen back upon another plan of action.

I have been by turns fascinated and perplexed by my close contact with Father d'Alzon through his spiritual writings and his letters. ^{*} For example, he writes: "If God is everything, then I am nothing... As a sinner, I have a right only to God's anger and to punishments... I am a monster of rebellion."
₂

This excessive style wearies me. It makes me feel far removed from reality and from the God of Jesus Christ, the father of the prodigal son. And yet this same page on humility, taken as a whole, brings us face-to-face with our vanity with undeniable effectiveness.

He wrote: "In my adorations of the Blessed Sacrament I will ask my Divine Master to inebriate me with the wine that brings forth virgins, and I will ask the holy angels who surround His throne to make my heart and soul as pure as they are."³ That's hard to take!

Then again, he says: "We love poverty as the guarantee of nobility of character."⁴ And: "Mental prayer is a combat between God and the soul until the soul, subjugated by God and purified by trials, arrives at union. Therefore I must not deem it surprising that mental prayer tires me, is distasteful and dry, but I must overcome these difficulties... The problem is not to know whether one engages in mental prayer with difficulty but whether one has a hard time getting started with it... You can choose your own method, but you must choose one."
₅

Now I feel like listening.

Teachers like Father d'Alzon, who are at once contemplative and active, are not very plentiful. It troubled me that he was comparatively unknown. I wanted to rediscover his magnetic power and ferret out what a dynamic man like him considered essential, but obviously expressed in a different idiom and as perceived through a different temperament.

As it happens, I underestimated the obstacle presented by Father d'Alzon's distinct emotional makeup. Therefore in these opening pages I want to discuss his personality so as to clarify the role I have assumed as his interpreter. My initial plan was to serve as a discreet guide through his most important writings. I simply wanted to quote him at length and remain as much as possible in the background.

My readers will soon see that I have not succeeded in being a discreet guide. I have had to wrestle much more than I had expected with the problem of his literary style. Besides, in the realm of ideas, I have found it impossible not to engage in a dialogue with him, especially when he speaks about suffering, the Eucharist, and social problems.

Being a journalist, how could I resist the temptation, where language is concerned, to indulge in some slight editing and rewriting, in tidying up a text to make it more attractive? I have shortened certain long passages, made some changes in wording, and joined sentences from different passages into a single whole.

I shall be criticized for doing this. Why have I not allowed the reader to see the original text exactly as it was written? Because if I had done so, it might have discouraged him or her (as actually happened to me!). And that might have happened at the very moment Father d'Alzon was saying something very important.

If a bit of rewriting does not distort Father d'Alzon's thought but makes it easier to grasp what he wants to express, why lose the opportunity of giving him a broader audience by reducing the distance that separates his literary style from ours? There are enough references to the original texts of his writings to enable those who so desire to draw from purer sources.

Of course, we must bear in mind that the original source is not always as pure as one might expect. D'Alzon was from Southern France and an improviser of genius. From a few scribbled notes he could talk for an hour. Without the inflections of his voice and the extraordinary expressiveness of his glance, we are left with cold lava, sometimes even a diluted residue that the Sister-stenographer had a hard time transcribing at best. He himself used to complain about it.

There is the same profusion and inevitably more repetition in his letters to his directees. To extract a fulgurant thought or a wise counsel from these long passages is not, it seems to me, a betrayal but on the contrary a way to help us to understand what he is saying. Someone may confront me with his carefully elaborated texts like the *Directory* or his admirable *Circular Letters*.

Even then I had to read and reread in order to preserve only the best, not with the intention of inventing a Father d'Alzon according to my own tastes, but to discover what is truest and most profound about him. Is choosing the most authentic profile a misrepresentation?

The problem of his emotional makeup and his ideas is obviously more delicate. In the next chapter I shall try to bring out a few differences between him and us, indicating where we might be misled if we do not constantly look at him in the context of his own time. He made his own honey, but with the season's flowers.

I have sought to present without unnecessary commentary whatever in Father d'Alzon's message retains its value and charm, and have made critical comments when something perplexed me. I think it is always beneficial to reflect on differences of opinion. On the other hand, I have completely disregarded whatever was obviously out-of-date. Father d'Alzon himself wryly invited us not to dig without discernment into the storage boxes of the old masters:

“Formerly when a preacher of some talent died, his sermons were put in a storage box for reference and so they could be preached over again. What was the result? The Revolution. These sermons had lost their punch. The task of expounding the truth must unceasingly be done anew. The conferences of Father de Frayssinous did some good, but they wouldn't do any good today. The needs are different, the battlefield has changed location. The same is true of Lacordaire in spite of his prodigious talent. Apart from a few immortal Fathers of the Church such as Saint Augustine, Saint John Chrysostom, and Bossuet, that is the universal law. Even in their writings we find things that are no longer relevant for our time.”⁶

I hope that everything I quote from Father d'Alzon will entice my readers to go to the original sources. As of the present moment, there are two basic and accessible collections of sources. New publications will also appear during this centenary year of Father d'Alzon's death. The first basic source consists of Father d'Alzon's *Ecrits spirituels*, the copious 1,500-page collection of his principal texts: the *Directory*, the great *Circulars*, the Meditations, excerpts from his sermons, from letters, and from his Notebook of impressions. The second basic source consists of the five volumes of his letters. Volumes I, II, and III of the *Lettres* were edited by Father Vailhé, and Volumes IV and V were edited by Father Touveneraud, covering overall the years 1822 to 1858.

What definitive works are there to read about Father d'Alzon? A solid biography is now in preparation. Meanwhile the reader who has plenty of time will delight in Father Vailhé's masterpiece: *Vie du P. Emmanuel d'Alzon, Vicaire général de Nîmes, fondateur des Assomptionnistes, 1810-1880*, Volumes I and II, 1926.

A shorter and more popular volume is *Un promoteur de la Renaissance catholique au XIX^e siècle: Emmanuel d'Alzon*, by Gaetan Bernoville, Paris, Grasset, 1957.

Finally there is a study of Father d'Alzon's ideas and their progressive development, *Un maître spirituel du XIX siècle, les étapes de la pensée du*

P. d'Alzon, by Athanase Sage, A.A. published by the Mother House of the Assumptionists in Rome in 1958, 228 pp. Indeed, I am indebted to Father Sage for the best in the pages which follow.

CHAPTER II

A WORLD IS DYING, ANOTHER WORLD IS BEING BORN

And what about us?

What are we sidestepping?

When Emmanuel d'Alzon was 22 years old, he wrote to his friend Luglien d'Esgrigny: "Over there, over there, 800 kilometers beyond Paris, beyond the Chaussée-d'Antin, someone, a young man who loves you, who has only half of his heart because you have the other half, is entering a house with long cloisters, numerous cells, and is uttering this terrible anathema as he strips himself: *Vanity of vanities, all is vanity!* and then wraps himself in a cassock."¹

Romantic? Yes, of course, after all this was 1832. But the romanticism would soon evaporate. Once Emmanuel d'Alzon was ordained a priest and settled down in Nîmes, he was obsessed by one question: For what kind of a world am I a priest? What is to be done so that God may reign in that world?

This provincial young man, this relatively unknown school principal would soon take on national stature because of his passionate interest in his own times. "If we cast a glance at the Western world, what do we see?" He often cast such glances.

He broke out of the bounds of a life spent entirely in Nîmes by his avidity to learn new things:

the books people were talking about, information obtained through correspondence, trips to Paris, Rome, and Turkey-Bulgaria, as well as into his own Southern France. Besides, he maintained these contacts simultaneously. A difficult journey scarcely reduced his output of long letters. His love of communication triumphed over distance. Without concern for what we would call wasted time, he would write twice the same day to the same person or set out for Paris in a stagecoach.

He began his travels riding the mail coach, and he welcomed the first railroad train with amazement. By contrast, the Bishop of Tulle said the following during his talk at the ceremony blessing the first railroad in Corrèze: “Away with you, white-flanked iron monster with fiery nostrils! On these bare rails that freeze the heart and mind, it is said you are bringing civilization. You bring only barbarism!” “With the railroad it will now take only 3 hours from Nîmes to the Vigan!... 44 hours from Rome to Nîmes! When the locomotive wheels are higher, we’ll get there even before we leave the station.”

In 1869 another burst of enthusiasm. Writing to the superior of the Oblate Sisters he said: “Do you want me to provide you with a sewing machine? They say these machines do the work of four factory girls.” Ten years later, it was the telephone. “Father Vincent de Paul dreams only of telephones. I shall get you one when they have been sufficiently perfected.” This man from a southern province had no fear of casting aside mysticism in his enthusiasm for the gadgets concerned with daily living. He was just as much at home during prolonged mental prayer as when he was selling his wine or some of his land: “The railroad is building a station in my fields.”

Toward a Sure and Simple Doctrine

Yet the apostle sensed the problem coming: to a world obsessed with material progress, comfort, and hence money, preaching the Gospel would seem increasingly unreal. He reacted violently against the upsurge of the bourgeois spirit: “O vulgar flock of respectable people who have built your hopes on your coffers and on the vigilance of policemen!”² He considered “the tendency toward material well-being one of the great debasements of the period, the destruction of all aspirations toward Christian perfection.”

3

He was less conscious of the rise of the working classes. Rustic aristocrat that he was, he was charitable, generous, but did not question existing social structures. He “bent down” over the poor of the cities without suspecting their frightful misery and their appalling working conditions,

without even being shocked by child labor, which had been denounced in 1841. At that very time Marx (whose *Communist Manifesto* appeared in 1848) was showing it was not enough to give alms and to dress wounds, it was also necessary to change a world.

Influenced by the traditionalism of Bonald, de Maistre, and especially Lamennais, he retained his distrust of the power of reason, but he does not seem to have taken note of their thesis of a primitive revelation as the source of all knowledge. He accepted the traditional view of the day which, without totally challenging human intelligence, saw in the Church the active depository of Revelation through which all essential and authentic knowledge comes to us.

In the perennial debate between reason and faith he trusted the Church with every fiber of his being, to the point of asking her not only for eternal truth but also for the truth of events and developments in the secular world.

In concrete terms, Father d'Alzon believed that to ask the Church was to ask Rome, whence his fascination with Rome and ultramontanism to which he completely committed himself. He expected everything from Roman truth which, especially at that time, enlightened from above and outside human societies and secular life. He was not drawn to truth extracted more laboriously and in more human terms from human experience or to inquiries by such new thinkers as Hegel, Comte, Feuerbach, Proudhon, Renan and Marx. Actually, Marx lived almost during the same years as d'Alzon-1818-1883.

His active temperament and his concern as an apostle led him to seek what was sure and clear. "Ifs, but's and maybe's confuse my mind."⁴ He truly represented the Catholic trend of the Restoration obsessed by disasters and vowed to urgent action: to defend and to transmit a simple doctrine.

When we listen to him we may be tempted more than once to accuse him of banality, but we will soon see how demanding it was. He makes us focus on essentials until we realize their scope and decide to make them govern our actions. It is hard to escape the linkage of his ideas: "You know? Then, meditate. You believe this truth? Good, what are you going to do about it?"

During his youth he was an avid reader, always taking notes. Lamennais, who had the greatest influence on his formative years, communicated some of his ideas to him and also the taste for

serious reading, especially the Fathers of the Church. Until the end of his life, whenever anyone told Father d'Alzon about an interesting book on doctrine, spirituality, or religious history, he would rush to read it without delay. When he reminded others of the need for study, he was always merciless. Referring to young religious, he said: "We must take severe measures against the ignorant, the lazy, and the incompetent — One of the great causes of loss of faith is the laziness of catechists and preachers. Preachers puffed up with self-satisfaction and ignorance who cause the Word of God to be scorned because of their lack of preparation."⁵

What Are We Sidestepping?

Why did this highly educated man with broad horizons have so many misconceptions? He breathed the Catholic atmosphere of his time! First of all, there was the notion of hierarchy: in the Church, the state, the family, schools, factories, convents. It would take a long time for the Catholic laity of France to admit that inequality is not as "harmonious" as a pastor of Lille taught in 1841: "The unequal distribution of wealth is necessary for the maintenance of happiness on this earth; the poor work for the rich, the rich help the poor, and the harmony of society results from this difference among its members, just as the harmony of a pipe organ results from the unequal size of its pipes." * _

Until 1900 the majority of the Catholics and most of the bishops of France refused to face the need for institutional reforms. In their eyes it was so dangerously revolutionary to modify the condition of workers in any way whatsoever that they got no further than charity without justice. Abominable? Certainly. But what will future generations say when they realize that *we*, for our part, have not boldly turned *the order of our world* upside down, to make torture disappear, to solve the problems of refugees, the handicapped and the elderly?

In Father d'Alzon's time the very concept of *order* per se was sacralized. To this was added a type of preaching that was directed against the things of the world. There was an obsession with sexual purity: the world sullies. There was a rejection of the modern. The new world was declared evil a priori. It was viewed in terms of what there was in it that opposed Christ rather than what there was in it that could be in accord with the Gospel. Father d'Alzon himself long retained this defense mechanism, which shows to what degree a spiritual man is weighed down by the ideas of his own time. However, he did not let himself be crushed. He began to blaze new trails. To measure his efforts and limitations in the face of the signs of the times seems to me more enlightening and encouraging than to imagine he controlled everything and was on the vanguard on all fronts. No, Father d'Alzon was

ensconced

in his own time, which is where an apostle belongs. He didn't see everything that was going on because he was in the midst of the fray.

He fought for the unity of the Church but he did not foresee ecumenism; rather, he held on to the idea of bringing the separated brothers back to Rome. He saw the workers' problem coming, but not the rise of Marxism. He fought passionately for the kingdom of Jesus Christ and for a wider knowledge of the Gospel, without concerning himself about German exegesis which exploded in France with Renan's *Jesus* (1863).

If a man of such stature sidestepped three signs that heralded the dawn of a new world and which therefore were the calls to the Church, what are we at the present time sidestepping?

“The Intolerance of Love”

Without reference to the trends of Father d'Alzon's time, the attitudes that might disconcert us most in him were his quasi-obsessional war against *secret societies* and his propensity to speak about *enemies*. In

this, however, we are perhaps the ones who will be judged by what he passionately called the intolerance of love: “We love Our Lord with the love that made St. Paul say:

If anyone does not love Jesus Christ, let him be anathema!

That's not very tolerant, but those who love much tolerate little. In these days when men no longer have the energy to love or to hate, when they do not realize their tolerance is a new form of weakness, we take our stand as intolerant men.”

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With Father d'Alzon, feelings quickly merged into ideas and actions. In the face of the aggressiveness of those who were attacking the Church and consequently attacking the faith of the people, he wanted to launch “the army of righteousness against the army of evil.” That was the great battle of his latter years: against Freemasonry. He wanted to create an anti-Masonic *L league for the defense of the rights of the Church*:

“We would gain control of all the labor organizations in order to set them against the secret societies. We must fight the enemies of the Church.” In his enthusiasm he even went so far as to imagine that this was a fight against a Satanic hierarchy: “In the first place, the *International*,

and then the secret societies of every country, and then the Jews with their anti-Christian

hatred, and then Satan.”

6

This is totally unacceptable language, but once again he makes us look at ourselves, at a certain passivity on our part, at what he calls “the silence of the mute dogs.”⁷ “I deplore the total inaction of the masses of Christians in the face of revolutionary propaganda.” These words summed up every kind of the then very active opposition to God and the Church.

The Catholics of 19th-century France reacted with an equally active and triumphal defense of God and the Church. The year 1860 saw the zenith of religious practice, of vocations and of the formation of religious organizations. But it had been a long journey back. It was necessary to start all over again.

In 1788, there were 135,000 Catholic clergymen in France, 152,000 in 1816 (165,000 in 1976). In 1812, there were 800 Jesuits and in 1850, 6,000. Between 1807 and 1849, the Daughters of St. Vincent de Paul increased from 1,600 to 8,000. Nor should we forget the missionary awakening promoted by the Society for the Propagation of the Faith. Battles were fought on all these terrains and that obviously gave birth to Christians dedicated to a holy war: “The Church on one side and hell on the other!”⁸ Let us rejoice that we have become more brotherly, but Father d’Alzon’s belligerence should also alert us as to the quality of our tolerance, which might indeed be no more than lukewarmness on our part.

His Fight for Freedom of Education

Another of Father d’Alzon’s lifelong fights was directed at wresting freedom of education from the State in France. Three dates will suffice to call to mind these struggles which are still going on today: 1853, freedom of primary education, a freedom that the Church would use very harshly against public-school teachers; 1850, freedom of secondary education, with the Falloux Law; 1875, freedom of higher education. Yet this freedom was so far from perfect that Father d’Alzon did not let his guard down: “Freedom of education is still only half a freedom. Let the founders of the new Universities be allowed to organize their own programs and show by the results that they are worthy of greater freedom. When this has been done we shall take up again our motto *Delenda Carthago* (i.e., Carthage must be destroyed, that is to say, the State’s monopoly of the universities inaugurated by Napoleon in 1802), and we shall enter the lists once more.”

9

Here again Father d'Alzon (who was a member of the Superior Council for Public Education in 1850) was fighting for the faith. How could Christians be formed if their years of schooling were a desert devoid of God? He saw his century turning completely to rationalism, proclaiming atheism, and calling "free thought" an aggressive counter-faith. Being a man for whom Christ was at the heart of his thought and of his life, he could never accept a society in which one could not speak in lofty terms of praise about God, not only in the churches but also in the schools, and everywhere people lived, everywhere the common people breathed.

It was at that time that a popular Christianity was born in France. The better coexisted with the worst, but Father d'Alzon was not duped. He developed great enthusiasm for pilgrimages and for Eucharistic fervor, but looked askance at the way the Sacred Heart was being honored and the flood of devotions which were preferred to the official liturgy of the Church.

He could not stand the slightest symptom of religious senti-mentalism and individualism. His love for Mary came to him straight from his love for Christ, and he drew his Marian devotion strictly from the Gospel. He discreetly distanced himself from the wave of apparitions that occurred during his time. Yet a local pilgrimage site, Notre-Dame de Rochefort, with its penitential aspect which was very popular at that time, held an important place in his life.

The Pope's Knight in Armor

Then there was still another feature of 19th-century France: the Roman question. The Pope under attack was defended by France's Papal Zouaves, whom Father d'Alzon did his part to recruit. His passion for the Church and Pope Pius IX's misfortunes made him a veritable knight in the service of the Pope just as unconditionally as the knights of an earlier time had been toward their sovereign king.

Pius IX was Father d'Alzon's Pope for a great part of his life, since his papacy lasted 32 years. Five dates stand out during his reign: 1848, Pius IX had to flee Gaeta; 1854, the Immaculate Conception; 1858, Lourdes; 1864, the Syllabus of Errors; 1870, the First Vatican Council, and then the end of the Pontifical States and the Pope considering himself a prisoner in the Vatican.

Father d'Alzon played an important role at Vatican Council I. There he joyfully watched the defeat of Gallicanism and the exaltation of the Pope through the definition of papal infallibility. Yet he went much further in his unconditional loyalty to the Pope, and spoke of "eager obedience to his known intentions." He even urged people "to think like the Pope," to manifest "an inviolable attachment for him, and a fervent love."¹⁰

In all of this, we discern above all a logic of love. If one loves Jesus Christ one loves the Church; if one loves the Church one wants to see her united, and this unity resides in the Pope. Father d'Alzon was viscerally a royalist, less for the sake of the king himself than for the bond he always perceived between the throne of God and the thrones of this earth. God, the Pope, and the king awakened in him the same images of hierarchy, stability, unity and knightly service: "Fifty or sixty thrones have crumbled and Satan wants to overturn the Pope's throne just as he would like to overturn the throne of Jesus Christ in heaven."¹¹

Cast into the mold of a republican by his loyalty to the rising democracy, so as not to link his apostolate to the sociopolitical structures of the past (what a lesson for us!), he remained a man of his lineage and of his time who could still dream of an orderly world: France was the king; the Church was the Pope, the symbol and reality of strong cohesion. "In the Church we contemplate stability in the midst of societies that are crumbling."¹²

Could anyone ever forget he was born in 1810? It meant seeing the unraveling of an orderly world where obedience reigned, guaranteeing the permanence of order. Father d'Alzon's comment: "*An outmoded world is disappearing*"¹³ aptly describes the 19th century and his own part in it. Yet if others grew melancholic over it, Father d'Alzon drew from it an inventive courage: *A world is being born. That is what attracts me to him and why I have written this book.*

CHAPTER III

FATHER D'ALZON'S FAITH-LOVE

"I want to love you, Lord,

but who are you?"

I long believed that the hallmark of Father d'Alzon was faith. I used to refer to him as *a man of faith*. A

new approach has branded me with his love for Christ:
Jesus Christ is my life.

When he was 36 years old he wrote; "I want God with all the powers of my soul and all the transports of my heart, I want Him as much as anyone can want Him."¹ Then, two years before he died: "You are my one and only desire."

²

And yet it was impossible to forget the place of faith in his life, the power of this faith, his obstinate insistence on knowing everything about Jesus Christ. I have come to think that he established an absolutely unique bond between faith and love.

Unique? Isn't that rather trite? One might be inclined to think that love and faith are inextricably linked in every Christian life. As a matter of fact, there are Christians whose love is not very enlightened, and others whose faith is cold. With Father d'Alzon, we cannot read anything of his without encountering such an intimate interaction between faith and love that it constitutes

something really original, a faith in search of love, a questioning love: “I want to love you, Lord, but who are you?”

I really think that to understand Father d’Alzon we must speak of a faith-love on his part, and this is not trite at all. We need only evoke some dry, lifeless terms in common usage: religious education, recycling the faith, religious problems, doctrine, what one must believe, nobody is learning anything now in catechetical classes. Of themselves, none of these terms excludes love. However, *in actual fact*, catechetics, theology, the concern to transmit the faith do not always inspire us to know in order to love. We are just emerging from a period of Christian training when learning about religion was closer to a history lesson than to an initiation into love.

For Father d’Alzon faith is the means and the space of a life of love: “All the powers of my being must reach out to Jesus Christ, that’s my life. Christ is my life. Is Jesus Christ my all?”³ These are the opening lines of the

Directory,

the manual of spirituality he composed for his religious. It is the work of a man possessed by Christ. No other book makes such an abrupt beginning with the essential theme: “Is Jesus Christ my all?”

A little further on, we come across this flash of lightning: “To love Jesus Christ, we must know Him, and to know Him we must study his perfections.”⁴ Faith-love is there whole and entire. To know You because I love You; to know You always better in order to love You more and more.

This knowledge in order to love can be born and can progress only in faith. Where other loves are concerned, a thousand means are available: the face, the voice, cohabitation, photographs, letters. Here, everything is given by faith, and only by faith. Faith is the origin and the food of a life of love with God. Faith thus understood is not, therefore, just one aspect of Christian life, a virtue along with other virtues: it is the whole of life centered on Jesus Christ. Faith colors everything: virtues, desires, and actions. “Jesus Christ is everything. It is to Him we must constantly dedicate ourselves; He is the one we must seek, proclaim, preach. It is His doctrine we must teach, His morals we must practice, His life we must imitate by continually repeating: ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’”⁵

Christ always. This is the soul, the dynamics of faith-love. It gives Christ to us and makes us live deeply united with him. Sometimes this union is a brilliant light, faith-sun, passionate study, but at the same time a union of love.

Faith-love is also a powerful activity seeking to prove love! The believer, as Father d'Alzon sees him or her, is not only someone who adheres to certain beliefs, but a man or woman granted a happy love and a hope that dares to take initiatives.

The Theological Life

As Father d'Alzon saw it, the moment one lives an experience authentically one believes, loves, and hopes. Rather, one believes by loving and acting. We are accustomed to a much more compartmentalized presentation of faith, hope, and love, the virtues we call "theological" because, *by the grace of God*, they make us adhere to God and share in God's own life.

Father d'Alzon sees them as extremely important, while insisting so much on their cohesion that in the end they form an indissociable whole, the theological life. One step further, and he makes it a life centered on faith: "To see everything with the eyes of faith, to feel our hearts palpitate with immortal hope, because even here and now we can kindle in our souls the flame of a love that will blaze for all eternity."

This is the theological entity that constitutes Father d'Alzon's faith: it is light, love, and trust. As we shall often have the chance to note, he is the man of harmonious wholes, of integrations. Here faith becomes our whole spiritual health, and this globalism preserves us from many unbalances that he never tires of denouncing. He even creates a veritable theater of characters to be despised: theologians devoid of love, bigots devoid of doctrine, activists devoid of inwardness.

In confronting these spiritual cripples, the man or woman of faith lives a life of plenitude in which faith, love and action interact and restore one another's balance. The faith of such a man or woman never causes one note to vibrate by itself, but makes the harmony of a whole life resonate: the song that is in the mind, the heart, as well as the work of the hands.

Nowhere else have I ever found such *fullness* of faith nurturing love and hope, and in turn summoned by them to be ever more powerful. It is unique with Father d'Alzon. I think it is an understatement to say that he was a man of faith. He is the great exemplar of living faith.

In fact, all the spiritual vitality he actually deploys stems from this theological dynamism: humility and obedience springing from faith in the strict sense; prayer and poverty from hope; chastity, mortification and zeal from charity. I shall not follow him in these linkages which are actually varied. It is enough, I think, to grasp his principal idea: Christian living depends on the power of faith and on its unfolding into light, into love, and into trust.

Faith as Sun

Father d'Alzon's faith makes us think of the sun. Before the dawn everything was in place, but the meaning of things and the presence of God was hard to discern. We call upon faith and the sun rises: *"No follower of mine shall ever walk in darkness"* (Jn 8:12).

He insists faith is our sun: "We possess the sun and we say we are in darkness! We have narrow ideas, our judgments are like our thoughts, we grow smaller and smaller every day... We must have the courage to gaze at the sun and then we shall see all things as God does, we shall judge the way He does, despise what He despises, value what He values." * [_](#)

Speaking from his own experience, Father d'Alzon knew well that faith also has an aspect of darkness; "The night of faith appears to me like an abyss into which we must plunge, holding the cross and accepting what it signifies."⁶ But whether it be darkness or sunlight, faith makes advancing possible in what Father d'Alzon calls "the supernatural world."

It is not easy to use this expression because it evokes magic or some strange superstructure, with *supernatural* ideas perching atop the natural ideas. Obviously, that is not Father d'Alzon's idea of the supernatural. He contrasts supernatural with *human*, in the pejorative sense of narrow, shortsighted. We who can live in the vast horizons of faith limit ourselves to what our eyes and our reason present to us.

Faith bursts this closed world open, presents to us the whole universe for which we were born, the world of man and the world of God offered to man, the two worlds forming but one now that Jesus Christ has opened the frontiers between them.

Father d'Alzon was always amazed that Christians refuse to live in these wide open spaces that faith provides. Since Saint John told us: "*we proclaim to you the eternal Life that was present to the Father and became visible to* as" (1 Jn 1:2), can we be content with a life without Life? Why not breathe in God, why not become naturalized by faith with the ideas and modes of behavior of the Kingdom? That is the *supernatural* spirit Father d'Alzon talks about so often. Nowadays we would tend to say it is a spirit constantly reminding us that there is an *elsewhere*, there is something else.

Since faith is light, we must not close our eyes and live as if we were ignorant of the Trinity, the Incarnation, Christ dead and risen, eternal life. That is our world, and it is in these perspectives that we must read the countless texts in which Father d'Alzon sets life in faith (the supernatural) in opposition to a life reduced to merely tangible realities (the human).

We are *human* when we close ourselves up within the limitations of man, his instinctive reactions, his reasonings, his scientific knowledge, his energies. We are *supernatural* when "we cast off our sentiments in order to take on those of Jesus Christ."⁷

For to put it very concretely, faith-light is the Gospel, it is Jesus-Truth: "*You have the words of eternal life?*" (Jn 6:68).

Father d'Alzon describes the human at length, pitilessly; "The ideas that spring from our milieu, our education, our temperament, the totality of notions by which we have been fashioned and that are a second nature for us. Alas, almost always those that are most untrue, most human, preside over what is quite wrongly called a Christian life! Whence come narrow judgments, surrender to our impressions and repugnances, to human desires, to routine. Do you want to enter the supernatural life? Come out of the narrow circle of those crude, mediocre, vulgar Christians who accept God's law only in a minimal way. Their aspiration to crawl on the ground is loathsome. Go up higher. Accept the ideas of faith and the transports of hope."⁸

If we want to remain in the light of this sun we must maintain our faith at the level of our experiences of life and education. This means: we must study. Father d'Alzon never stopped

fighting intellectual sloth in its various forms, the anti-intellectualism of the militant (*What matters is action*),
of the devout soul
(*It suffices to love*),
and of the right-thinking bourgeois:
Why should we rack our brains and not be content with a nice comfortable little faith acquired in catechism class?

Father d'Alzon fought this anti-intellectualism and religious ignorance everywhere: "Although the bourgeois is more conceited than the working man, he is no less ignorant of his religion. It is a fault of many Christians that they do not search enough to know what they are obliged to know about God."

He was very hard on those whose mission it was to open others to faith: "One of the great causes for the loss of faith is the sloth of catechists and preachers." Referring to the young priests of his diocese to whom he had to give examinations: "Generally speaking, once they are in a parish there is nothing they are in a greater hurry to do than forget what they learned in the seminary... The obligation to obtain education when it is possible is far more serious than is generally thought. The priesthood is perishing because priests do not know how to speak about God."⁹

He was equally aware of the opposite danger: religious studies that make one proud, that desiccate the heart and complicate research to the point of paralyzing preaching and the apostolate. In reacting against that danger Father d'Alzon seemed—for once!—rather narrow-minded! In the library of a religious he wanted only "a very few modern authors in which recent errors are exposed, so as to more easily refute them." He condemned the "fanatics of study" and the avidity of young students who "raise curious objections, who love debate and go off with disastrous stubbornness, preferring human reason to divine authority."¹⁰ One regrets such an attitude of condemnation on his part, so dangerously close to fideist distrust of the labor of reason. And yet we can assume he had in mind specific cases of study carried on without love.

"Say what we will, certain studies desiccate the heart. One lives through the intellect, one lives in an imaginary world, one plunges into the sciences, one approaches even religious questions from the angle of discussion that almost always robs them of their unction. The result is a *je ne sais quoi* that resembles a land swept by a persistent North wind."

He always came back to one of his favorite themes: the dialectic of loving-knowing. This dialectic preserves us from two things he hated: sentimentalism devoid of doctrine and doctrine devoid of love. If love lacks the incessant support of doctrinal recycling, it quickly gets out of breath. Conversely, many sermons and much pious reading have done nothing to change lives because they did not sufficiently stress a strong desire to love.

The constant swinging back and forth between the urge to study and a tendency to curb this urge might disconcert us if we did not see in it his deep concern to defend faith-love against its two enemies: ignorance on the one hand, and inquiries born only from curiosity on the other. Father d'Alzon could agree to admire religious research only if it enlarged the horizons of love. One moment he was eagerly searching, engaged in what he called "the study of the mysteries." And the next, he was deep in contemplation: "to scrutinize in order to adhere loyally."

A Faith that Loves

"The more I try to scrutinize God with a sentiment of love, the closer I cleave to God. I want to know God better with each passing day, to penetrate the divine nature in faith through Jesus Christ who alone can reveal God to us. Jesus Christ in His whole being is a description of God. But it is in faith that we must strive to know God, and this world of faith is in many ways very mysterious. Do not be surprised if you encounter exhaustion, anguish, uncertainties in faith. You do not see. *"No one has ever seen God (Jn 1:18)*. That is where we feel our powerlessness to speak about God. St. Augustine says: 'Since God is ineffable, as soon as I say something about Him I say what must not be said.' The triumph of wisdom has been to make us nonetheless know something about God. We can do it through the illuminations of faith.

Eternal life

is this: to know You, the only true God, and Him whom You have sent, Jesus Christ (Jn 17:3). Knowledge of God through Jesus Christ, that is my goal, so that, knowing Him I may love Him."

12

I have cited this admirable page in its entirety because it is the best description of faith-love: "The more I scrutinize God with love, the more I cleave to God." Love is born of faith and then it assumes the first place: "The more I scrutinize with love..." But it is faith that gives love its consistency: "The more I scrutinize..." And when faith's search has made us advance in love we "cleave to God" (cleaving in the Berullian sense of a union of loving adoration). Nothing about this process is easy. Being a man ready for every type of combat, Father d'Alzon leads us in the

battle to know God through effort. But this is a battle of love: “So that, knowing him, I may love him.”

It’s all very clear. Faith is not only the path toward love, as the saying used to go: believe and you will love. *Faith itself is love*: believe and you love. It is in faith, through faith, that we are united to God here below. ¹³ This involves something that is not always perceived. In the *Summa*, II, 1,2, Saint Thomas points out that the act of the believer does not stop at the way he expresses his faith more or less well—the defined dogma—but it reaches God Himself *as He is*—the mystery being affirmed.

It is in its extraordinary power always to reach its objective that faith is unitive. While this movement of love is not automatic and does not always occur, faith can have the warmth and impatience of love. It draws Jesus Christ “into the heart,” in the words of one of Father d’Alzon’s favorite texts: “*May Christ dwell in your hearts through faith!*” (Eph 3:17).

Faith That Impels to Action

Father d’Alzon often stressed the two aspects of love. The affective aspect: living one’s life as love, as a union of love. The effective aspect: accomplishing feats for the beloved, love proving itself.

Here we again encounter one of Father d’Alzon’s familiar linkages: to know in order to love, to prove love by action. That is another way of describing the theological life: the binomial faith-love bursts into actions of trust and love which are the mark of hope.

This is not Péguy’s “little girl” hope, but a fantastic force capable of mounting an attack against the highest wall, as the admirable Psalm 18, the hymn of fabulous trust in God, proclaims:

For with your aid I run against an armed band,

and by the help of my God I leap over a wall.

(Ps 18:30)

This is indeed the threefold theological power: trust armed with faith and burning with love:

I love you, O Lord, my strength,

O Lord, my rock, my fortress, my deliverer.

My God; my rock of refuge,

my shield, the horn of my salvation, my stronghold!

(Ps 18:1-3)

And then Verse 11:30 of *Hebrews!* Who could express the full power of trust more superbly and in less than ten words: *Because of Israel's faith, the walls of Jericho fell.*

This bold faith ready to attack anything and everything; this wild faith is indeed Father d'Alzon's faith-trust. It is exactly the opposite of the unworthy servant's mistrust in the parable of the talents:

- I know you, master.

- Ah! So you know me?

In fact, he does not know his master because he says: "I know you and I am afraid." Father d'Alzon says: "I know You and I trust." He learned very early that his life with God would unfold in trust. On the eve of his ordination he wrote: "I shall remember to have a boundless trust in Jesus during the most terrible moments of my life."¹⁴ He kept his word, and from his trust he drew his capacity to resist discouragement and his prodigious activity. Faith gave his hope the vigor of steel that made of it a hope against every kind of despair. He endured four years of trials that gave him the right to speak of the victories of trust: "Hope will be for us the principle of an absolute trust in Our Lord in all our trials."

¹⁵

He saw hope at work in three great battles: very harsh blows (physical sufferings, failures), hazardous apostolic ventures and the obligation to strive toward holiness that he mentions so often.

Speaking about what he has wrested by virtue of his trust, Father d'Alzon said something unforgettable: "Our hope measures what God can do for us." He was deeply touched by Jesus' words to the centurion; "*It shall be done because you trusted*" (Mt 8:13).

That is the litmus test of our prayer: Is it the expression of our faith? "If your prayer is permeated with the spirit of faith, you can be assured it will be more powerful than all human means inspired by the prudence of the flesh. Prayer is the only power, the true power of a Christian. We must plunge deep into prayer, we must go all the way to heaven to seek God's power."¹⁶

He was obviously quoting Mark 11:23-24; "*Whoever says to this mountain 'Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' and has no inner doubts but believes that what he says will happen, shall have it done for him.*"

Father d'Alzon was not thinking of an anti-doubt force, some kind of a psychological and voluntary activity that proclaimed, "I will not doubt, I don't want to doubt." His trust was rooted in the very power of his faith. The more we believe in God and the more we are aware of being loved by him, the greater our chances of overcoming whatever doubts might be barriers

between God and ourselves.

Mary is the unsurpassable model of this trust that knows no doubt: “Elizabeth explains Mary’s perfections to us: because you have believed, what has been foretold to you will come to pass.’ The spirit of faith will enable us to work wonders; when we really want it, our faith permits God to accomplish all His promises within us.”¹⁷

Here again we must not let ourselves be deluded. Faith-trust also has its aspect of darkness. At such times it seems entirely beyond our strength “not to doubt in our hearts.” During his bitterest trial (when the college was about to be sold and that meant collapse, defeat) Father d’Alzon wrote: “For the past two days, it has been impossible for me to say anything at the Consecration except ‘*Fiat voluntas tua.*’ Whatever God’s will may be, I accept it without knowing where I am going.”¹⁸

This trust in the darkest night is something Jesus expects! What a disappointment for Him to run up against doubt: “*How little faith you have!*” (Mt 8:26). And when the father of the epileptic boy tells Jesus: “*If you can...*” Jesus reacted forcefully: “*What do you mean if I can! Everything is possible to a man who trusts*” (Mk 9:22-23).

Doubt digs a terrible ditch between God and us. One day when Mother Marie Eugénie had wounded Father d’Alzon by doubting his friendship, he wrote to her: “You have made me understand how deeply doubt offends God.” Reflecting on this doubt, he went so far as to think that when we doubt God we kill Him: “Trust in God is rooted in His infinite goodness, and I doubt the goodness, that is to say the existence of God, in proportion to my lack of trust.”¹⁹

Only Father d’Alzon’s faith-trust can explain his capacity for action. Everyone has experienced the shattering of enthusiasm for new ventures in the face of defeats, misunderstandings, illness, and old age. Nothing could ever shatter Father d’Alzon’s zeal, even during the final hours of his life. He had hoisted his faith up to the summits where courage is found for everything.

A nun reported: “What impressed me most in my contacts with him was his faith which brooked no obstacle. And this faith was contagious. In his presence we had better not say the word

'Impossible.' "

Two years before his death he expressed wonderment at the extent to which his faith had indeed been "contagious," as he said. Writing to Father Vincent de Paul Bailly, he said: "You are a courageous man to write me with this faith that comes out of your pores, your fingers, out of every drop of your ink. I am resolved to be in 1879 a man of faith and trust in God, and to be the despair of all those rascals who surround us"²⁰ (This was on the eve of the persecutions of 1880.)

If we were to ask Father d'Alzon a question that expresses the tenor of our times: "After all, what does faith change anyway?" he would answer with another question: "What faith?"

CHAPTER IV

A MAN MAGNIFICENTLY ALIVE

"One cannot be a true believer

and lack humaneness.”

“He was born to command, he was quick, captivating, naturally imperious and decisive. He was inclined by nature to be blunt and even curt in the face of opposition. He must have had to win many heroic victories over his fiery temperament.”¹

If we ever thought saints must all be meek and gentle, this description can make us change our minds. It comes to us from one of Father d’Alzon’s favorite disciples, Father Galeran, who does not conceal the cactus aspects of his revered master in his *Sketches*. He was a noble character, yes, but certainly not an easy-going one. He enticed, but he frightened as well.

To quote Galeran: “He had very beautiful eyes, almost black, bright and piercing. When he got excited they gave off sparks. During conversations he gave the impression, by the way he looked at you, of guessing everything you were thinking, and this gave him a truly amazing influence over the hearts of others. His soul seemed to enter into yours. His customary expression reflected a superior mind joined to the most loving of hearts.”²

Imperious and tender. When one makes contact with him today, if only through his writings, especially his letters, one surrenders to his charm. A great lord. Because he was noble by birth and education? Yes, of course, but all aristocrats are not men of character. In Father d’Alzon two magnificent traits nurtured and developed one another: his superb humaneness and the faith whose power we have just indicated. For him, nobility meant to be a son of God, and with that as a premise he could not tolerate mediocrity.

Measuring the importance of this competition between character and faith, he fought as much to give his sons and daughters human dignity as to give them faith. We need to note the rarity of such an attitude at a time when talk about *the supernatural* and about *piety* sometimes camouflaged an alarming lack of the natural virtues.

Referring to his students of Nîmes, Father d’Alzon commented: “If by piety we understand a collection of petty practices or a tendency to think about God in order not to think about duty, and to cover a lazy intellect under the mantle of a sentimental devotion, our students are not pious at all.”

But how can we hold back a difficult question: What about those who do not possess these wonderful natural virtues? It's not by wishing that one can become Emmanuel the magnificent! And what if one happens to be what he hated most mean, spineless, and insincere?

The answer is to be found in Father d'Alzon's life and counsels. But we shall see that both his life and his counsels ran counter to our modern nonchalance and its ingenuous motto: *take me as I am!*

He will never tire of replying: Not at all. We must relentlessly examine ourselves. All his exhortations turn suddenly to a pressing examen: are you really doing that? do you really want that? We must, he goes on, fight in order not to remain the way we are now, in order to be better, nobler. He required this same *aristocracy of soul* of the rich young ladies of Nîmes, of the great ladies of the Assumption, of his rather unpolished men religious, of the young peasants of the Alummates and of the uncultured daughters of the Cévennes Mountains whom he made his Oblate Sisters. He kept saying: one cannot be a true believer and lack humaneness. Galeran explains: "By aristocracy he understood nobility of thought, breadth of heart, distinction of manner." He would perhaps allow for the not very refined manners of our own day, but he would yield nothing with respect to the need for lofty horizons and greatness of heart.

A Great Heart

Young Emmanuel had jotted down the following verse from Vulcan in his philosophy notebook: *Non sibi sed toti natum se credere mundo* (I must think I was born not for myself but for the entire world). Is this not frankly excessive? Rather it is the measure of a heart that would never stop fighting against any and all narrowness.

At twenty-three, as a seminarian in Montpellier, he wrote to his friend Gouraud: "Scripture says: *You have enlarged my heart.*

It is through this expansion of heart that Catholics are called today to do great things. The disciples of Christ therefore need to enlarge their hearts more than ever. If we do not love, who will warm this poor human race that is becoming congealed under the icy chill of egoism? Unfortunately nobody wants to have a love as vast as the world, as vast as Catholicism. Oh! my

friend, I beseech you, enlarge your heart so as to love as much as possible. It makes me very sad to see everywhere only coldness, self-interest, pride. What a vile creature is the man imprisoned by egoism in the narrow sphere of his own individuality! That is the direction in which we are heading. If the physical order were in harmony with the moral order, our earth would consist of an infinite number of little globes whose center would be a very ugly animal separating itself from all that does not touch it materially and coiling itself up in its isolation. It seems to me, as a Catholic, that my destiny is broader and that by losing myself in the immensity of God, by being consummated in unity with Him through love, I could grow greater, amazingly greater.”

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We cannot help noting his love of the word “great” and his vocabulary of words like: great things, expansion, vast, immensity, grow. And of course the word *Catholic* which has taken on a much more limited sense for us today but which to his mind burst through all limitations and boundaries.

His most fearful condemnations were for those who were too much preoccupied with themselves. Those who had already disgusted Saint Paul: *Quae sua sunt quaerunt... They are seeking their own interests rather than those of Christ Jesus* (Ph 2:21). For Father d’Alzon the test of “Catholic piety” was to be “more concerned with God’s interests than our own.”

The moment he glimpsed the slightest symptom of narrowness, he charged forward. As he wrote to Marie Correnson: “I believe you are very capable of acquiring the gift of setting petty things aside. You must occupy your mind more with all that can concern the great cause of the Church. May your heart become a thousand times more generous, a thousand times more zealous for all that is great, beautiful, divine in the perfections of Jesus Christ and the cause of the Church. You must enter a wholly new life through a certain power of the intellect of which you are capable and by an expansion of your capacity to love souls the way Our Lord loves them. Marie, become a saint. Enlarge, increase everything within you that is meant to turn toward the infinite.”⁴

This is a beautiful sample of his spiritual direction. He gives encouragement (“I believe you are capable”), but he is also merciless for her lack of breadth. His most ferocious text against narrowness is nestled in notes taken by an alumnus of the College of Nîmes during the famous Saturday night talks:

“The broad mind is dedicated to a cause, the narrow mind is dedicated to itself whatever the cause.” When a subject pleased him, his style sparkled and his listeners were delighted. He explained: “The broad-minded person soars on the summits, the narrow-minded digs mole holes where he is content to seek shelter because his essential goal is not to be compromised. He calls that prudence.” The fear of being compromised, prudence-cowardice, are two faults he often castigated.

Suddenly he would raise his voice to fire a cry from his heart: “Happy are the broad-minded served by a fine character.” This was his beatitude! He knew that it was attractive because it nurtured the growth of those who felt they were accepted and trusted. Father d’Alzon was trusting to the point of seeming naive to every sort of finagler, but he knew self-centeredness was born of mistrust. In the end, both sides founder into petty meannesses: “Let us get rid of the mistrust that shrivels us up.” He never used the term “Shrivels up” without scorn.

A Liberating Sense of Humor

Talking about words, I think his devout stenographers and his biographers have deprived us of the words he hurled with fierce delight to jostle the narrow-minded. (For instance, there was the religious who must have taken his advice literally because he was going around with his head lowered.) Father d’Alzon told him: “The rules of modesty are not meant to make us go about looking like idiots.”

This man from Southern France had no lack of humor, one of the marks of a well-rounded temperament. It is a pity we have no records of what Galeran called “his crude words and his somewhat excessive frankness.” What I have been able to glean shows him to have been a man of unfettered and liberating verve.

Here is his description of a ceremony in the cathedral of Montpellier: “I was exasperated when I saw distracted members of the choir yell a *Libera*.” Talking to a religious whose arms were dangling at his side: “Have you been given the task of planting parsley?” At the Vatican Council of 1870, alluding to *Revelation 3:16* which refers to the Lord’s spewing out the lukewarm from His mouth, he attacked certain *moderates*:

“I have great love for moderation but not the kind that has the effect of an emetic on the Lord.”

Amélie de Pélissier was very much humiliated because she was always yawning during meditation. He counseled her: "It's not good for a young girl who wants to be a saint to be yawning while she prays, but that's not a reason for you to get discouraged." And to Mother Marie Eugénie: "My little abbey of Cabrières has been dipped in a mystical starch that I am not able to appreciate." Finally, after Marie Eugénie and Mother Correnson had squabbled he made this racy comment to Father Vincent de Paul: "I am like Louis XIV with Mme. de Montespan and Mme. de Maintenon. I would prefer to have all of Europe on my hands!"⁵ At 63, petty, shabby conflicts always made him roar.

Catholic, That Is to Say, Universal

Mother Marie Eugénie had known this for a long time. A woman of very high intelligence, she had quickly discerned her need to live her life in broad terms. She sent him an ingenious description of the sectarian spirit around her, commenting: "...but praise God, not in you. You are less inclined to get lost in one branch of Catholicism at the risk of having no more concern about the trunk, or at least of thinking the whole trunk is present in one branch."

Father d'Alzon was indeed far from holding a mutilating view of Catholicism: "We are simply Catholics, but as Catholic as it is possible to be. We must not only be Catholic at heart but also Catholic in our ideas. And when we speak of broad ideas, I don't think there are any broader ideas than that."⁶

Unfortunately there are those who are determined to shrink these horizons, but he never ceased using the word *Catholic* to indicate the broadest possible horizons. Indeed, everything he touched remained or became broader. He urged others to meditate while carefully refraining from imposing a method of meditation. He wanted austere religious, and to this end proposed to them the simplest and most universal mortification: work. He loved to talk about Mary but in the broad perspectives of salvation, without giving a privileged place to one particular mystery, devotion, or shrine.

A Broad Idea of Freedom

It is interior freedom that broadens a human heart. Father d'Alzon possessed this freedom in the supreme degree. He fought many hard battles for all the external liberties of man, but he

knew very well that what defines and gives value to men or women above all else is their interior freedom.

He wanted his congregation to be made up of free men: "Once your mind and your broad orientations are assured, launch out!" This freedom of action resulted in the great creative initiatives of the Little Sisters of the Assumption, the pilgrimages, the publications, the Mission of the Orient. Here we find an essential hallmark of Assumptionist spirituality: a lofty idea of freedom.

Father d'Alzon saw freedom as God's gift, "perhaps his most precious gift, the most excellent thing about us. It is through our freedom that we can honor God most. It is an admirable mystery in which God makes us ever freer in the measure that we let Him reign more perfectly over us and in which the perfection of our obedience is the principle of the perfection of our very freedom."⁷

He applied these principles to education. He wanted various forms of freedom to be forged by trust. He hated spying: "That turns children into hypocrites." Writing to a young man, he said: "Capable and deserving students should become accustomed to exercising their freedom which they might later put to such poor use if they have not been prepared."⁸

He saw "freedom of soul" closely linked to poverty.⁹ His insistence on this point was certainly linked to what he observed among lay persons, priests, and even religious, who were caught up in the enticements of money. Money, as he saw it, was a demon of anxiety, tormenting us both by the desire to accumulate it and the fear of not having enough of it. He saw money as the anti-Lord's Prayer: "Freedom consists in not being the slave of any earthly desire and in practicing the Lord's Prayer to the letter as much as possible:

Give us this day our daily bread.

Absolute trust in God is never disappointed."

Only such trust can enable us to live in the purest and most admired independence: selflessness. "Freedom of soul is the fruit of poverty. How can you engage in mental prayer while dreaming of money? Let us suppose you are attached to anything whatever, examine and see if you have the same recollection, if your anxieties do not come and attack you when you should be under the greatest obligation to think of God's interests. What scandal self-interested religious give to others! Note on the contrary the respect that surrounds the selfless man. There is nothing quite so noble as a selfless temperament, no one possesses as much independence

as the one whom everyone knows wants nothing.”

Enlarge the Space for Your Tent

One of the forms of small-mindedness that especially disgusted Father d’Alzon was the meanness that impels one to be jealous of others who succeed. He used to say: “Let us love and encourage in others what we ourselves cannot do or be.” This strong sea wind sweeps away much meanness. We have to believe castigations were in order on this point because he brings it up twice in the *Directory*. He wanted the Assumptionists to love their small congregation, “while avoiding the exclusive love that would see only what might be done among us and by us.” With respect to apostolic zeal: “We shall rejoice in the good that others have done and that we have not been deemed worthy to do; and even where it would have seemed we had the right to work, we shall say with Moses: may it please heaven that all prophesy!”

10

He would be gratified with our current sense of pluralism. He strongly reproached those who are incapable of giving credit to anyone else: “I see certain people who are so convinced of the perfection of everything they do that they reprove those who behave differently. This habit of excluding others leads to the self-centeredness of cliques.”¹¹

For Father d’Alzon, breadth of mind and heart is simply a requirement of faith. Can we be small in mind and heart when we think of the magnificence of God? How can we measure out our love when we stand before Love? Writing to one of his directees, he said: “God is love, that is why you must develop a very noble and very great heart.” And “Why not ask for this great heart until you have obtained it?”¹²

The instant there was any tendency to reduce greatness of heart and mind, he reacted vehemently. Mother Marie Eugénie blamed herself for having “enjoyed the pleasure of a delightful conversation.” By return mail he wrote: “Your petty anxiety makes no sense! Forget all that. Ah! my daughter, let us not get lost in spiderwebs.”¹³

We are great-minded when we have broad horizons and do not keep our eyes focused on overly personal problems. To the Religious of the Assumption he said: “I would like to give you a spirit, to wage total war against your personality by boundless dedication to the cause of

Jesus Christ. Let there be no more question of egoism, individualism. We are unworthy of our mission if we hold on to a few shriveled sentiments. Dilate your hearts, open them to noble inspirations. Forget yourselves. To have narrow, self-centered, petty sentiments in the presence of such a great work is abominable. Amid these great events, the anguish of the Head of the Church, the flood tide of revolutions that is rising every day, when I come across souls so completely preoccupied with themselves, groaning over their 'sufferings' [for example, a superior does not understand them, their confessor is too stern, they are not treated with proper courtesy], do you want me to tell you what I think? They are nothing but little fools three times over."¹⁴

He bluntly addressed the nuns gathered for their Chapter: "You have dedicated yourselves to spread the reign of Jesus Christ. But is it Jesus Christ whose Kingdom you want to spread or is it not your own dominion? The kingship of Jesus Christ is the greatest of causes, minds and hearts must be enlarged. Horizons must be opened for the myopic, great fires kindled for those who crave only for their foot-warmers. Happy are the superiors whose ambition embraces the whole world."¹⁵

The whole world. His vision had not shrunk since he was sixteen years old. For example, there are those who went to Rome and saw only a nest of intrigue there. When he was in Rome for the First Vatican Council he filled his lungs with a Catholicism whose dimensions were those of the world. Concerned with the Oblate Sisters just coming into being, he wrote to their young superior: "My stay in Rome makes me feel the need of a Catholic piety, that is to say a selfless, generous, universal piety. Another effect is that it is lifting me above the horizons of nations. Missionary women must be permeated with broad, far-ranging ideas."¹⁶

When I read things of this sort I cannot help thinking of a text in Isaiah which must have been very much at home on Father d'Alzon's lips when he was ridiculing someone or opening someone to greatness: *Enlarge the space for your tent!* (Is 54:2).

CHAPTER V

THE TENDERHEARTED MAN

"I have an inordinate desire

to see you."

"I love you, Luglien. The mere thought of what concerns you stirs me from head to foot." Words of Emmanuel d'Alzon when he was twenty-two. From his family's château in Lavagnac he wrote many letters to his friends in Paris. These letters of his youth fill almost all of Volume I of his correspondence and offer us a beautiful book on friendship.

In these friendships God was always, *always* present. Writing to Luglien: "I was in the chapel, I felt at home there for what I wanted to do (dream about his friend); I thought that God would not be an intruder. I told God that I loved Him, and I believe my friendship for you is good since it awakened my love for God."

This is an important comment which applied to all his friendships, with both men and women. Since Emmanuel d'Alzon was a fiery being, he kept watch over his heart, his emotions, and his body, without killing them. He discovered that the more loving we are humanly speaking, the more we can love God: "We amount to something only with our nature. Certainly, we must

divinize it, but to destroy our nature is to create nothingness where God had willed to fashion the masterpiece of creation.”

The geography of this heart covers four areas: the friendships of his youth (only men); his family, especially his sister Augustine; his directees (who were all women), especially Mother Marie Eugénie, his great friend; and the religious of his congregation. In this deployment of friendship he succeeded in achieving a combination of enthusiasm which dared affirm itself and of merciless scrutiny to purify this enthusiasm. With him as our teacher we can have the rare experience of true friendship.

Christian ... Friendship?

When Emmanuel d'Alzon was nineteen years old, he meditated on friendship, starting with Chapter 6 of *The Book of Sirach*:

A kind mouth multiplies friends,...

Let your acquaintances be many,

but one in thousand your confidant.

When you gain a friend, first test him,

and be not too ready to trust him...

A faithful friend is a sturdy shelter;

he who finds one finds a treasure.

A faithful friend is beyond price, ...

A faithful friend is a life-saving remedy...

A faithful friend is an elixir of life...

Sir 6:5-7; 14-16.

Emmanuel searched for the wellspring of this “elixir of life”: “It flows from the Ocean of love, the First Cause of all beings and of their affections. Then Jesus came, repairing and enlarging our hearts as well as our intellects, and now here is perfect friendship: to love the way Jesus loved. Without Him, there is one man and another man, and nothing more. With Him, to speak the way the Serbian poets do, the two are married in God. Someone who does not love or who loves badly will ask: How is that possible? Let him listen to Jesus speaking to His Father: That they may be one like Us.’ And Jesus added: ‘So that the world may believe that You sent Me.’ The most evident proof of Jesus’ mission and the greatest miracle He worked is this love among all human persons.”

We have just made the transition from friendship to fraternal charity, and we have done this quite naturally. Naturally? It is not so simple. When Christians begin to use these expressions “That they may be one like us... To love like Jesus Christ,” and the classical “I love you in Jesus Christ,” they leave the shores of good, warm friendship to navigate in something that is not very warm. One might think that in the expression *friendship* *Christian* the word *Christian* serves as a bulwark against friendship. To declare: “I love you in Jesus Christ” signifies more often than not that one loves in a very moderate way!

None of this for Father d'Alzon. When he says: "I love you," he loves. And if he says: "I love you in Jesus Christ," it means he really loves, he loves passionately. In this he surprises us: by this ease in loving "in God," by this truly lived identity between friendship and fraternal charity.

He loves God in any manifestation of fraternal charity: friendship, apostolate, communal life, the yearning for unity among Christians, deep concern for the mission. In all of that, he establishes interchanges: between God and the brothers, friendship and the apostolate, spiritual direction and friendship. It is an opulent world of affection in which neither God nor anyone is forsaken.

Why am I insisting so much on this? In order to learn from him not to set our multiple bonds of friendship on one side and our efforts to establish a relationship with God on the other. We need to exorcise vexatious images of opposition. We need to stop dichotomizing Christians into categories of those who are soaring toward God, as opposed to Christians solidly rooted in their earthly friendships. For Father d'Alzon, friendship is one of God's domains. It can be helpful to reflect on this with him.

He had no trouble finding God in a man-to-man encounter. And he never thought he had to turn away from men and women when he was with God. There was no dichotomy in his ideas about it because his heart was not divided. He was not seeking a life unified by rejection or excessive acceptance. Rather, he was seeking a life of integration. To put it in more concrete terms, he was incapable of maintaining a friendship far removed from God, and equally incapable of forgetting his friends and his undertakings when he was close to God. We have many occasions to admire his power to combine situations where others would say: *either* this *or* that.

I see in this the triumph of his tenderness. A loving heart integrates more things and does so more easily than a heart that is somewhat dry. It is because our hearts are dry that we often choose activity as *against* prayer, and prayer as *against* tender friendship.

Did I say "tender"? I am suddenly aware of advancing on mined terrain. There are words that the Christian mentality does not particularly like: pleasure, desire, tenderness. And here we have a whole chapter on tenderness! We have raised so many suspicions about tenderness that there tends to be very little of it among Christians. * And even among religious who are "gathered to love one another" according to the Augustinian definition of the monastic community. On the contrary, this beautiful, warm and pure tenderness had an immense place in the life of Emmanuel d'Alzon. How could I pass over a trait that was so characteristic of him?

Family Bonds

He had an especially close relationship with his sister Augustine three years his junior. In his correspondence with her we admire his tenderness and psychology, but also his way of respecting a woman, by not fearing to share with her the lofty subjects that interested him intensely.

We are also impressed by the fact that he was not content to be amiable with her. Sometimes he helped her by shaking her. She wanted to get married but her keen intellect too clearly revealed many faults in her suitors. In a letter he told her: "I've been hearing about prospective husbands for eighteen years! You know how to decide when it comes to refusing, but you don't know how to decide when it is a question of doing." He continued on this tone, and then concluded: "You must see in my letter a real sign of friendship, for I confess it hurts me a little to write these harsh words to you." His tenderness was never weakness. He could have entitled almost all his letters: *At the risk of displeasing you.*

He does not seem to have reached those summits of friendship with his sister Augustine or with his other sister Marie where friends help one another to become saints. However, he did encourage two of his directees who were sisters, Juliette, an unmarried woman, and Delphine, a widow, along the road to holiness: "You have found each other again. After a year spent testing each other I think the time has come to bring your two lives still closer together. You love each other. I don't know whether you have the Christian tenderness of two sisters in whom friendship of the soul is stronger still than the bonds of blood. Do you want to love one another that way from now on? You must promise to give each other mutual support, to stop listening to the petty trifles that reflect coldness between you."

Up to this point, his counsel seems very commonplace. But now he soars: "You must ask Our Lord for the strength to inspire one another to perfection. It won't be easy. One of you will be too eager, and the other too pessimistic. One of you will be discouraged when the other is filled with fervor. But how great is the power of the affection of which we are sure! I believe I am revealing a new world to you."¹

The Friendship That Lasted Forty Years

In 1838 Father d'Alzon wrote to Eugénie de Milleret who was to become Mother Marie Eugénie of Jesus. He was twenty-eight, and she twenty-one. He would be her director and she his. Together they would found the Religious of the Assumption and the Assumptionists. She would be in Paris, and he in Nîmes. For forty years, by correspondence, they carried on a dialogue, sometimes on a daily basis, which was an amazing mixture of business, canon law, tenderness, and entreaties to holiness. Theirs was the story of true friendship which never ceased examining itself on the place it should have in two lives totally given to God.

The reader of these letters will also take a look at his or her own friendships. In following this correspondence from year to year we see the things that favored this mutual affection. There was the need to pour out to a very understanding listener the continual verification of what each of them was doing and dreaming of doing; there was the helpfulness of friendly criticisms which did not make concessions. They kept on tirelessly throwing each other the ball of their desire for God and for perfection: "Become a holy woman! Become a saint!"

One of Father d'Alzon's first analyses of this friendship places it *within* two immense loves: "Between the supereminent love of God and the general love of our brothers, grace prepares other relationships in silence. Through you I have understood a little bit about a friendship that calls for almost infinite respect. I shall also be indebted to you for the desire and the strength to remain more habitually in a loftier atmosphere which I cannot quite describe."

These are the accents of a preacher, but even so their friendship soon took on more passionate tones. He learned that she was ill and he wrote to the person who had informed him of her illness: "If her illness is in the least bit serious, I shall set out on foot or on horseback if I cannot come in a stagecoach."

Then, resuming his role as a teacher: "Given the fact that God wants Christians to lend support to one another..." but his heart gave a leap: "...you are indeed the person on whom I lean with the greatest trust and whom I am most anxious to carry." I lean on you and I carry you. What a lovely definition of friendship! And then he cries out: "You have made me suffer quite a bit by your skepticism about my friendship for you. I want to be for you all that is best in this world, I want the innermost depths of your soul to belong to me, just as the innermost depths of my soul belong to you. I discover within me a complete friendship for you, a friendship that is a bit dry because of your doubts. Have a little more faith in me."²

There is nothing missing in these letters. Reprimand: "You are in the state of a person who has not yet taken her stand to belong totally to God or who, after giving herself, seeks to take herself back on some points." Trust: "I entertained wild imaginings that needed only to be punctured." A paroxysm of tenderness: "Allow me to give myself a name that I find it impossible to write without emotion because I sense its full significance, the name of your *true friend*." (He underlined the last two words.) And then at times there were efforts not to be too exclusive: "I gladly consent to your seeing Father Danzas. I want only what will do you the most good."

But what tone did she take in speaking to him? In 1854 we can sense she was deeply distressed over the slow growth of the men's congregation. Was it not the fault of the founder who was squandering his energies? She said so quite bluntly: "Authority is given to superiors only to exercise a constant solicitude for the perfection, progress, and development of the specific spirit of the Order in each religious and in each house. Well, my dear Father, I find you are all kinds of good things, but not so for your own people, and it is to this I directly attribute your lack of fruitfulness in the matter of vocations. Whether you are preaching to the Protestants, fighting Gallicanism, or allowing yourself to be consumed by the importunate, that's not the heart of the matter. What you are not doing is your greatest obligation of all. Since I thought all these things, could I fail to tell them to you? Would I otherwise really be your friend?"

3

With her usual directness, she put him on his guard against one of his many bursts of enthusiasm: "Juliette will not become a nun. Are you wise in drawing her so much into your life? She needs affection, it is an error for her not to be married and not to have children. If you have to take the place of all that for her, you are committing yourself to an impossible course." Was this jealousy on her part? Probably. But above all it was lucidity and courage. It's good to have a friend of this stamp who, during the difficult times, continues to admire you without being blinded.

This friendship would endure to the very end, assuming the colors of autumn as the years passed. When he was 64 and she was 57, he wrote to her: "I have an inordinate desire to see you." After one of their endless fallings-out, he wrote: "As I grow old, I am becoming hateful, send me on my way." Then follows a delightful P.S.: "I am inviting you to send me packing. I would be in real trouble if you followed my advice." Then comes the ultimate scrupulous revision: "This morning I was reading Saint Theresa's opinion on Christian friendships.⁴ It seems to me that I can love your soul beyond measure. I am close enough to my own eternity to see things clearly. I would like to see you raised very high up there!"

Marie Eugénie has been beatified, and the cause of Emmanuel d'Alzon has been introduced.

Their friendship brought them joy and holiness. A fine twosome, but a steep upward climb. A diamond-hard loyalty protected them. They knew that to want friendship was to want friendship, nothing else. Or it meant to want love, in order to be still closer to what they had lived, but on a purely spiritual level.

On that point he was inflexible with himself and with all his directees. He has been criticized in other areas, but never on this point. Attractive as he was, we have to conclude that he knew how to protect himself. Writing to Juliette whom he loved so dearly, he said: "You tell me that you are going to start studying grammar again (he had asked her to do so, he was always urging better education) in order to please me. These words shocked me. You must not do anything for me, but for Our Lord. May our souls be as one, providing Our Lord is the bond that unites us and our overwhelming concern."

Was Father d'Alzon Community-Oriented?

Was this tenderhearted man "communitarian" as the saying is today, that is, community-oriented? It is hard to apply the term and the reality to him. The ideas of some sort of collective being that has a life of its own and that dominates in a certain way the life of each of its members was totally foreign to him. For him life together consisted of two sorts of bonds: the bond of authority (a friendly but very authoritarian bond) between a superior and each of his subordinates; and bonds of fraternal charity among the members of the community. He saw no link between a "community" (with its own representation and its own voice) and the superior. Father d'Alzon always took his stand on the interpersonal level. There is a sentence in the *First Constitutions*

that even seems to reduce the communitarian spirit to patience: "The novices will be trained in the life of the community, that is to say, in tolerating each other's temperaments."

5

Granted, in a very realistic sense this is already a tremendous step, and at any rate a sound basis for more positive progress.

Father d'Alzon's own relationship with his first religious could not be anything but the cloudy authoritarianism common to founders. But he saved the day by his tenderness. He called Father Pernet "his Pernichon." He wrote to Father Vincent de Paul: "I love you very much. That is well known, but it should be a bit of velvet to your heart." Writing to Father Galabert who was doing outstanding work in Turkey: "Allow me to speak a tender word to you. I love you a little more every day, and I probably don't let you see enough all that I feel in my heart for you."

Being hypersensitive himself, he noted that friendships need signs: "It is not enough to have good feelings in our hearts for our friends. We must also let them know about it."⁶ Manifesting friendship was surely his secret. This outgoing, warm and friendly behavior on his part has put its mark on Assumptionists as a whole. It is what we call "the family spirit": simplicity in relationships, joyous cordiality and openness.

The Association from which the Assumption was to be born in 1845 bears the mark of the *Acts of the Apostles*:

"A spirit of simplicity reigned. Successes and failures were candidly laid out at meetings for all to see. The reading of private rules of life stimulated to fervor through a holy emulation. Each one wanted to live in a glass house. Father d'Alzon insisted on the bonds of fraternal charity, a charity that was humble, active, respectful."

7

Ten years later Father Pernet described an Assumptionist community: "A cordiality reigns that I had not yet noticed. We are more communicative and like to get together. Each of us makes an effort to be cordial to the others." Anyone who has ever tried to live a communal life of any kind will not take these details lightly. Father d'Alzon went so far as to declare, with reference to a school: "A less efficient administration but one that safeguards affection is a thousand times preferable to an excellent administration that provokes hatred among the students."

In writing the *Directory* he wanted the fraternal charity that characterizes an Assumptionist community to be "full of tenderness and mutual respect."⁸ But above all he multiplied his appeals for sincerity, apparently with the thought that when people are sincere and honest, the battle is won. There was a moment when he was almost ready to merge the nascent congregation with a better established one having branches for men and women. Yet he drew back before the risk of losing the precious spirit of openhearted freedom. Referring to the Sisters of the other Congregation, he said: "There is underhandedness, mystification at the service of petty intrigues." As to the Fathers of that same congregation, he said, "One is frightened at the thought that the hallmark of the Assumption in the way of breadth, of candor, may be absorbed by a multitude of regulations that are good but that take away a certain freedom."

Freedom and friendly trust, this was his way of always building his programs on complete collaboration among the men religious, the women religious, and members of the laity. He was allergic to small worlds too tightly imprisoned within themselves, and saw any and every type of community as the heart of a much vaster activity that attracted a throng of men and women of good will.

“Let us reach for the ultimate limits of the heart.” Knowing himself well, he realized fraternal life is constantly shattered by pride and violence. He repeated to satiety: “Be gentle and simple, be humble.”

No one ever loved humility, but so what? He continued to row against the current: “You must work at it. What are you doing by way of practices of humility? Let us forget theories a bit and come down to practice.” When Mother Marie Eugénie was hurt in her arguments with Father Cambalot, he offered her the only effective first-aid: “You were too much engrossed with your wound, that made two wounds. Charity heals everything.”

He confided his own struggles to her when he felt emptied of charity because someone had irritated him: “For the past two weeks I have been experiencing feelings of hatred or scorn. The retreat helped me to make some headway but again this morning I had to go to confession before Mass.”

The best description Father d’Alzon ever gave of this fraternal charity, constantly worked at, is to be found in his instructions to the teachers of Assumption College. He was particularly vehement against those who concealed their lack of love under a veneer of good manners.

“Charity does not last when it stops at politeness pure and simple: that is only a shell. The world can be satisfied with that, but Jesus Christ rejects it. He needs something else. Let us therefore overcome all bitterness.

“Diverse moods and temperaments inevitably lead to friction. Let us be patient, but above all let us search for the true motives for these words and actions that have wounded us. We may be the ones who motivated them; the offense that grieves us very often starts with ourselves. Let us go to the ultimate limits of the heart, let us see if these hasty tempers, these arguments, these incivilities are not in great part our own fault. It is pleasing us to pose as innocent victims; we want to be in the right, but sincere charity knows how to go beyond these lies. It puts its finger on the heart’s wretchedness. It frankly acknowledges that we have received only what we deserved. God gives this limpidity of interior vision.

“And what if we can say with complete simplicity that we have not called the offense down on ourselves? Well then, that says everything. We remain silent and do not aggravate the situation, we remain in a calm state of mind, we wait for the storm to pass. Let us practice this peace, this gentleness. Do we not have a sublime model to follow in Jesus Christ?”

“We prefer gracious ways, proper manners, the charm of the world. But what hypocrisy lies hidden under this polish! We may find a certain bluntness in the Christian attitude. Let us learn how to adapt to it: it is sincerity!”

“Let us wage relentless war against our touchiness. Let us bear God’s love in the depths of our hearts, let us make it prevail. Alas! we are too eager to honor charity in name only and not the reality. Let us overcome ourselves, let us cast aside or suppress our aversions, let us succeed in acting in accord with God’s thoughts.”⁹

A beautiful sermon? Yes, but from someone who practiced what he preached. Galeran relates that one day Father d’Alzon received with open arms a former student who had caused him much grief. There was some surprise at this warm welcome. Father d’Alzon responded a bit sheepishly: “What can I say? I had prepared myself to receive him as he deserved; then as soon as I saw him, everything fell through, I couldn’t help it, my heart won out.”¹⁰

CHAPTER VI

A TIRELESS MAN OF ACTION

“An Assumptionist should be

dissatisfied with himself

unless he has accomplished

a hundred times more than

he can.”

“An Assumptionist should be dissatisfied with himself unless he has accomplished a hundred times more than he can. His rest must consist in doing a thousand times more.”¹

This is a passionate affirmation of love’s need to give itself to the maximum. Father d’Alzon made this appeal in 1873, at the end of the Chapter, after presenting a review of activities undertaken by the Assumptionists since the preceding Chapter. The young Assumption had founded the Alummates and some Missions, it was inaugurating pilgrimages and a publishing venture, it was fighting on all fronts with the pen, words and works, urged on by its founder’s enthusiasm: “The difficulties facing us are many, as is strong opposition, the field of our labor is vast, but ours is daring faith.”

This man’s capacity for action leaves us breathless. He preached nonstop, he wrote the way one breathes (2,000 letters published out of 7,000 that have been preserved and perhaps 40,000 written!). He administered the diocese of Nîmes as its vicar-general, meanwhile supervising his properties, ordering the building of new structures, directing the College of Nîmes, and guiding his congregation. He also kept up with developments in the East, fought for

freedom of education, and sat on the National Council for Public Education. He launched new programs and drafted spiritual writings. He was a journalist, a great traveler, a spiritual director, and a zealous awakener of vocations. We should not forget any of these activities when we try to evaluate what he has to say about action.

Nor should we forget what people were saying about him. His ebullient vitality annoyed and perplexed many. What are we to think of the accusations of activism and dispersion of energy made by friends as well as enemies?

The first answer to these charges is that after 1789 everything had to be started all over again. His era was bringing forth a new world; there was need for inventive men, men of decision, men of prodigious energy. Clustered around Father d'Alzon who was in a perpetual fever of creativity, the first team of his followers had the efficacy of a commando squad that could be hurled against any objective. As long as the Assumptionists remained faithful to these origins they were to be defined not in terms of one or another goal, but by their frenzy of creation. And here we have the second answer to those who criticized his intense action: he was the very epitome of creativity.

Father d'Alzon hated standpattism. When he was twenty-four, he wrote from Rome: "Here very few people have the sense of movement. If only I had some way of persuading these good people that the world is on the march!"² Thirty years later, again from Rome, he sent this savage sketch to Mother Marie Eugénie: "As I skirted the walls of the convents for women in Rome, I wondered what lay behind those walls: good girls, rather addicted to routine, of no great account, praying or mumbling, sanctifying themselves or not, but exercising no influence whatever at a time when all the members of the Church should be soldiers, apostles, victims, vitally alive. What is the cause of this moral and intellectual collapse? Pious routine. Do not allow your daughters to sink into it. Inspire them with the desire to shun repose. Don't let them confuse peace with rest."³

The Pride of the Active Person

This impatient man, who jostled people the way he pushed and shoved the chairs in the cathedral, was also a man of enduring patience in the face of many failures and the whole gamut of suffering: his nerves and his teeth, money problems, disappointments with respect to vocations, delays by authorities, his lifelong fight against his proud temperament which was sometimes malicious because of his keen intellect and scoffing irony. Where others would have

been stymied, he succeeded like a brilliant billiard shot off the cushion. He learned to endure quite as much as to charge ahead.

Was his natural strength responsible for all this? True, he was a strong man, five-foot eight inches tall, very straight, with a rapid gait, a good horseman, an excellent swimmer, a formidable bowling player. We must never forget he was a man of Southern France, who, according to Galeran, "could make the bowling balls on which his ball hit burst apart."

He had a will of steel, which enabled him to complete his history course in spite of a terribly painful neuralgia. He detested people who were listless, weak-willed. But pride was not far behind. At the age of twenty, he wrote: "I shall work hard to know myself, to be master of myself, and then I can more easily fashion myself into what I want to be." The successes that followed and the ascendancy he exercised on everyone threatened to go to his head and to make him speak with too much self-assurance. A serious health crisis would change the tone of his "I want's."

May 19, 1854: a cerebral attack. In the crucible of incapacitation his activism and voluntarism would be purified. From this experience he would learn to entrust his actions totally to God. The word *abandonment* would become his watchword.

Action-abandonment became one of the syntheses that defined his character, and this was not merely a matter of words! After his cerebral attack, he experienced something that no theory can inculcate: all of a sudden even the most ardent vitality can sink to point zero.

He would pull himself out of it, and renew his energetic calls to action. But from that time on, people could listen to him without annoyance or skepticism because they could see that his road was the same as theirs: scaling walls of impossibilities. Walls to be scaled by abandonment to God and by prayer. Not the abandonment of resignation, of course, nor a prayer of withdrawal before a life that has become too arduous. That would not have been like him at all. No, we are speaking of his acceptance of his limitations, a very healthy mistrust of himself that hurled him into God's hands so he could act in spite of everything.

To act! He, the great man of prayer, would always mistrust prayer whose arms do not reach out to work. To the end of his life, he would continue repeating: love must prove itself.

Mother Marie Eugénie, who was very Berullian, queried this attitude: “And yet, does not the devotion we believe to be the hallmark of our congregation consist in union with the life and the mysteries of Jesus?” In response, he insisted: “No, that does not suffice, love is a wellspring of action, it must be translated in other ways than by sentiments; it wants acts.”⁴

Time Must Not Be Wasted!

Now that we see where his zeal originated and where it turned to be replenished we more easily accept to be jostled by it. He never allowed dreams and passing fancies to dissolve action. “What can we do? Gather information about that.” He distrusted any delay between the proposed program and its execution. That is why he was accused of being restless and imprudent, but he had his own ideas about prudence. He used to say that many things will never see the light of day because so many objections have been chalked up against them.

He harassed his directees: “Free yourselves of theories!” He ferreted out a very convenient type of indecision: “You are not what you should be for lack of certain efforts to master yourself. You need to struggle and you have gotten into the habit of escaping struggle by indecision. You are becoming incapable of decisiveness. Just as certain persons have a softening of the brain, you have a softening of the will.”⁵

In every sphere he would keep insisting on the transition to action. Mental prayer? “You can choose your own method, but choose one!” And what about certain ideas? “They must be disseminated.” A doctrine? “It must be made accessible.” Father d’Alzon has been called a simplifier. Obviously, we can wish he had not been so reticent with respect to theological research. Yet his reticences alert us about a way of searching that, whether we are aware of it or not, will delay the moment when we must plunge into the water.

What interested him was the diffusion of an important truth and setting its consequences to work, rather than erudite explanations. He was instinctively attracted to the simplest truths, the ones with the firmest foundations and the ones that gave one a chance to live them out. He would chisel them out in sayings like this: “I shall never believe we can love God without courage.” All creative persons, all galvanizers of men have this genius for making shocking statements that implant an idea and inspire action.

With him one is always marching to battle. He loved the image of the charging cavalry. As he saw it, we have to fight to cling to God and to wrest graces from Him. We must fight to advance in fraternal charity, fight to proclaim the Gospel according to the needs of one or another audience, fight to create, fight to defend the poor, the helpless. His spirituality is a litany of combats. On the eve of his death he wrote: "I am ready to fight." He would die pen in hand, the ultimate activity of this man adept at every kind of activity.

He was especially merciless toward indolence that tries to economize on intellectual effort: "Laziness thinks sentiments suffice! What makes people ineffective? Laziness." He made the same accusations against those who are always lamenting: "It is not enough to deplore decadence, we must extirpate its causes and constantly throw more wood on the fire."

Above all, time is not to be wasted! "Time is passing, passing, and we are doing nothing. Oh! time which is the price of our eternity! Time is flying terribly fast and we are not sanctifying ourselves."

Those Famous Examens? A Pedagogy of Watchfulness

Father d'Alzon was always a great admirer of will-power. He saw what the will is capable of achieving when, purified of all conceit, it dedicates itself to a great goal: to create, to serve, to become a saint. Here is one of the magnificent counsels he gave Mother Marie Eugénie: "Use your will-power to decide to be a saint."

He kept his own will under arms by means of the examen, the famous questionnaires of the *Directory*.

There are those who hate this way of tormenting the meditator: groping introspection, spiritual narcissism! This is a serious objection. We have only to take a close look at his questions that are often very sharply honed arrows.

Shall I give an example? Here is one taken from the examen that concludes the meditation on hope: "Do I really yearn for heaven? Do I trust in grace? Am I inclined to discouragement? Am I not afraid of going too far if I respond to God's calls?"

The number of questions is often excessive, and the way they were formulated is often outmoded. And yet it is easy to make adaptations, using a very simple approach: 1. Did I understand correctly? 2. What change can this bring about?

The first question is meant to make us pause a moment: Don't be in a hurry to accept an idea, an action. Seek first to understand God and his plan for everyone, for your community, for you. Made in Father d'Alzon's image, the *Directory* is much more religious than moralizing. "That I may know you" precedes and always accompanies "That I may know myself." Even in this practice of the examen that could make us too introspective, Father d'Alzon keeps us in God's presence.

This helps to avoid discouragement and scruples. We remain under the eye of God who, if we are to believe the Bible, is not lacking in kindness or in humor. Consequently it is an examen in love: I want to scrutinize whatever in me is opposed to You, I want to know what can raise me up toward You and what can help me to serve my brothers better. Yet nothing that I discover will frighten me because You know us, You love us, and You know that we want to love you.

In this spiritual climate, the second set of questions ("What must I change? What can I do?") becomes an awakening of the will. At the same time, it is not an attack of voluntaristic fever expressed by the attitude: Now that I know what I must do, you'll be amazed at what you see!

There is a certain amount of such fever, of course in the *Directory's* questions: once you understand better what you must do, how can you fail to dive into it at once? But when Father d'Alzon was composing these examens, he was aware of his own powerlessness, he knew that between a clear understanding and its realization there had to be a cry to God: "What stupid words are these: I feel strong. What can one do without grace?"

In anyone else, one might have thought he was using words a bit lightly. But in his case, he was speaking the truth he himself was living: apostolic action and the fight to attain holiness are simply one long string of illusions if the action into which they launch us is an action which we have not sufficiently prayed over. As he grew older, he repeated more and more: "Let God do His work in you." In this he was calling us to the most difficult human activity: allowing God to do great things for us (cf. Lk 1:49).

But What Does God Want?

For Father d'Alzon, to act implies: *according to God's will*. He did not fail to bring this to mind very explicitly. Writing to Mother Marie Eugénie, he said: "I pity you for having laryngitis, but you must want God's will." A strange will. Does God want me to be sick?

No, it is life following its course, and God allows life to go on. God alone knows what life is worth and how great a gift He has given us, with its joys and sorrows intertwined. He wants us to live out everything with love and courage, and Father d'Alzon was thinking of this will of God.

Life in its details is the locus of our courage and of our love. In that sense, everything in life is a sign of God, the will of God. God wanted the best Mother Marie Eugénie could bring forth from a moment of life when she had an ailing larynx. In this same spirit, Father d'Alzon wrote on another occasion: "Become holy in the very midst of your sufferings." Father d'Alzon never let go of the spirituality of action. For him everything was activity, everything was a battle, everything was obedience to God's great plan for us. The point was to exploit our life, while remaining very actively *in the midst* of whatever hardship descends upon us. To be able to look at illness squarely in the face, as a piece of life, not as a parenthesis. To

live out

illness. To struggle to overcome it as much as possible, and endure what cannot be avoided: pain, constraint, helplessness, terror. In order to save,

within that very suffering,

treasures of courage and redemption. Isn't that an activity, regardless of the crushing hurt?

Father d'Alzon lived all that so completely that we shall need an entire chapter to discuss it at greater length.

And What of Obedience?

Go ahead and act, that's very fine. But what about obedience? To follow what Father d'Alzon has to say on obedience we must first take a good look at our current suspicions. We are not in love with the purity of command or with certain slavish mentalities. Let us try to open ourselves to another climate of opinion.

For Father d'Alzon, obedience to a superior is a seamless garment: it is to obey God. With two great rectifications. First, it is not an abstract formula, the superior is not transformed into an idol, he is not God. Nor is he a pure transparency, as if one went directly to God through the superior now completely eliminated from the picture. The superior is a very concrete mediator, and hence a very human, personalized, limited, and changing mediator. Yet it is indeed in my superior that I discern a way for God to speak to me, allowing for the precautions necessary in the use of such mediation. We are not respecting God when we listen blindly and servilely to a superior. Neither do we respect God when we listen to the Superior badly or not at all. The effort to obey with intelligence and dignity is a part of the normal difficulties of life.

Secondly, Father d'Alzon balances obedience in a powerful way through initiative. This should not surprise us. He gives training in such a beautiful form of obedience that he can get us to soar. And yet he never stops praising initiative. In fact, he makes of initiative one of the hallmarks of the Assumption spirit.

However, he places initiative *at the end* of a significant list of qualities. If we have a very great spirit of faith, sincerity, and sacrifice, then welcome to initiative and hail to the freedom to charge ahead!

⁶ Respect for initiative is one of the marks of the nobility of his spirituality. On the other hand, he was never a patron of harebrained ventures or crafty obedience under the pretext that one must let people do their own thing: "Great freedom of movement, providing one is inflexible with respect to the broad outlines I have traced for you."

7

He wanted this very free initiative to be bold, providing it was serious. He is famous for his many attacks against milquetoast prudence: "We say we are prudent because we do not dare. Faith is bold, let us have the boldness of faith. No matter if it is called recklessness! There are those who perceived prudence as a woman aged by fear. That kind of prudence wears bedroom slippers and a bathrobe. I want none of it." And this rough rejection: "Let us know how to dare. What does anyone accomplish without boldness? This will frighten some people, but they will not be part of the Assumption."⁸

This is really the exact opposite of the cringing obedience that was somewhat too prevalent in families, places of work and convents in his day. But nowadays when obedience is breaking down everywhere, let us not imagine anarchy can serve life better than obedience. For a magnificently alive person like Father d'Alzon, the criterion was that everything must serve life. The thought of obeying because one doesn't have the nerve to disobey would have enraged him. On the other hand, to bungle a community project through disobedience seemed just as indictable to him. We get the feeling that for him obedience, and hence command as well, are

noble only insofar as they are vital powers of action.

But What About Action Without Love?

Father d'Alzon presses us to action to prove love. And what if this action begins to drift far from love? It has been known to happen to men and women of great apostolic action. This has even resulted in the forming of disastrous attitudes in certain Christian milieux. For example, the tendency to mistrust action that leads away from God, action that wounds fraternal charity, etc. We know what the obsession to keep our hands clean produces in the area of social and political action: our hands stay clean, but we let things run their course.

We can well surmise that never for an instant did Father d'Alzon think of preserving his followers from the dangers of action by having them turn to piety. Here again he wanted them to remain *in the fray*, to be where something was happening, where there was creative activity, where the poor and lowly were being defended: "See what an immense field of action is opening up to us in the visitation of the sick, the evangelization of the poor, the running of orphanages, the propagation of good books and all the other works impossible to enumerate because new ones are coming into being every day."⁹

At the same time, he was haunted by the thought that so many actions are devoid of love. Why? Returning to this subject several times, he rooted himself in an idea that he espoused very early in his life: "We must earnestly ask the Holy Spirit for love. There is not enough love in our actions because we don't know how to make contact with the Love that is the Holy Spirit."¹⁰

Only the Holy Spirit can transform a powerfully active person into an apostle, that is to say, someone who does not forget love and does not wound it. It is a question of total self-giving, and here total is not merely a figure of speech! We sense this in one of Father d'Alzon's last sayings: "The foundation of all religious life is self-giving."

CHAPTER VII

THE MAN WHO SUFFERED MUCH

Even at this moment I

know that You love

me. I am not afraid

because You are

here.

“I fell ill in May, 1854, and my illness lasted three or four years with unbelievable bouts of exhaustion and torture.”

On May 19, 1854, he suffered a serious attack. A year later, it would be diagnosed as

cerebro-spinal meningitis. The disease attacked both his body and his capacity for intellectual work. He was to go through periods when the slightest worry, a thunderstorm, the wind of the South would cause him such terrible headaches that he could not write a single line, say five decades of the Rosary, carry on a conversation, or even think. For two years he had to resign himself to life in slow motion. Yes, he, the tireless man of action, and at the age of forty-four!

These two years of physical suffering were aggravated by two terrible moral trials, the failure of the College and the dearth of vocations for his newborn congregation. He was truly learning to experience the cross. Four months after his attack he wrote: "The night of faith appears to me to be an abyss into which one must hurl oneself holding the cross and accepting everything that it teaches and signifies."¹

He was to teach us the lessons of the cross with his very life in a more convincing way than with his writings. In this chapter, therefore, it is wiser to talk about him rather than quote him extensively. For it is when he writes about the cross that his style is most outmoded.

How would this whirlwind of a man react under the avalanche of physical and moral trials that now descended on him? Without a second look at what had been, he entered a physically limited life, indeed, a life that was all but annihilated, with the one thought of living there and then "what God wants and the way He wants it lived." The result of this wholehearted acceptance of suffering was that not only did he endure it more than honorably but he actually achieved his greatest progress toward holiness within this dark tunnel. He would later be able to say from his own experience that "Christian life is not the exemption from suffering but the sanctification of suffering."

Following his journey through life during these four years can help us dispel the notion that sickness and moral trials are times of death, of pure and simple desolation. This man who was so little suited to that sort of thing is the living proof of what is possible for us when we are most helpless.

Are We To Love Suffering?

During this period of his life he began what he called his *Reflexion Journal*² which describes his first steps along this new path: "September 17, 1854, Our Lady of Sorrows. I asked the Blessed

Virgin to obtain for me through the sufferings she endured at the foot of the cross the grace of giving birth to our little family with as much pain as it may please God.”

“As it may please God.” He would have liked to glimpse what the Lord expected of him during this trial: “I asked Our Lord to make me know His will clearly. It seemed to me that He was taking me to be humiliated, to be made to suffer and to die.” He thought about death, he looked back over his life: “I have not been a saint, I have not pressed others enough toward holiness... I am more than ever amazed by the time I lost gossiping.”

After this look back over his life, he very quickly began to live his illness in an active way: “It seems to me that I can accept my illness like a saint, and submit with a great fullness of love to everything that can happen to me that is most troubling. That’s settled, I am delighted to be sick, since Our Lord wills it so, and I offer Him my sufferings with all the love of which I am capable for the extension of His kingdom... I don’t know whether God wants me to ask Him for health, and I want only what He wants. If He wants me to ask for health, it seems to me that it must be through the Blessed Virgin, and I vow to make a pilgrimage to Our Lady of Rochefort.” (This meant going about eighteen and one-half miles on foot, finishing the journey barefoot.)

Words became reality: “At Mass, as I held the host in my hands, I asked God to take me also as a victim. I can imitate Our Lord only by becoming a host and oblation like him.” He kept Mother Marie Eugénie minutely informed of the progress of his transformation: “Submission and trust in God increase every day. But my head is breaking.” The next day he wrote: “It is certain that I am altogether different, really altogether different.”³

When Father d’Alzon speaks to us of the cross, we must not forget he is at the height of his ordeal and fervor. He is nourished by *The Imitation of Christ*; he quotes a passage from Chapter 18 in which Jesus says:

From the hour of my birth until my last gasp on the cross, I did not spend a single moment without suffering.”

Fortunately, that statement is not true. But the idea visibly pleased him.

Do we need to speak of dolorism? By dint of rereading his appeals to suffer, I see in them a very positive doctrine for living in a time of trial, allowing of course for the tastes and style of his time. His corrections in the matter of style are significant. For example he says: “We shall have saints when we find men *avid* for suffering.” But he quickly explains: “We shall have saints when men *accept* suffering.” We find the same modification in an

exhortation to the tertiaries: “Love suffering” becomes: “Bear the burden of suffering with love.”

I think this transition from the quest for suffering to the acceptance of suffering is the key to an understanding of his many writings on the Christian way of approaching suffering. The exhortation goes on to express his thought clearly: “Since Jesus suffered, we, too, must expect to suffer, but we must not be satisfied with a state of resignation, we must learn to love suffering through our love for Jesus Christ.”⁴

“Love of suffering” has taken on a masochistic tinge for us. For Father d’Alzon it encompasses everything we can live that is good in suffering, the effort to exploit this suffering as a wellspring of love. He was never able to countenance any wastage of life, and he was now considering the greatest waste: sinking into a state of incapacity, irritability (his nerves were betraying him), complaining. At all costs he had to discover something positive *in all that*.

True to his temperament, he didn’t spend time theorizing. He used the language of his time about ‘the love of crosses,’ but in order to go straight to a *practice of crosses*, to that alchemy that can transform them into love.

He did not point to suffering as the one and only road of life to follow, but he did have to explain what he meant. Writing to Mother Marie Eugénie he said: “I can assure you that I have never considered suffering as anything but *one* of the paths to union with God.”

Bringing All Suffering to the Foot of the Cross

In any case, after May, 1854, that was his way. He was studying firsthand “the science of suffering, the science that made Mary, at the foot of the cross, the mother of all men.” This practical science leaps over the “Why?” of suffering and goes straight to the “How to suffer?” This is a question that must be meditated at the foot of the cross, in the presence of Jesus and Mary in their sufferings: “That is where new men are born, men brought forth by suffering.”

“*You will give birth to your children in pain*” (Gn 3:16), applies to everything that suffering brings into the world when it is lived the way it was lived by Jesus and Mary. Father d’Alzon never

separates them when he speaks of the cross; he joins the Passion of Jesus with Mary's Compassion, the suffering that saves us and Mary's sharing in this suffering as the model for participation in the sufferings of Christ. It is the very bold saying that Father d'Alzon loved to repeat:

"In my own flesh I fill up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ for the sake of His body, the Church"

(Col 1:24).

The primordial activity of the Christian who is suffering is to make his pain Christ-like. Father d'Alzon tells us: "Many things are transformed at the foot of the cross." And he offers a practical means of being constantly ready to suffer like Christ: to have a crucifix and to make of it our *Everyday Friend*.

A long text of his has been popularized under this title.

*

Today, it would not be acceptable as it is, but its spirit is still valid. In the morning look at Christ on the Cross to promise Him we will firmly carry whatever our cross is during the day; to think again about the cross in moments of anxiety and struggle; in the evening, to go to the foot of the cross to give an account of our day to the Lord.

Not everyone is attracted to such companionship with the cross. And yet those who are ill, depressed, overwhelmed with worries and sorrows can find in it a means of not letting themselves suffer alone by themselves in their corner like animals. Bringing all suffering to the foot of the cross is one of the great secrets of Father d'Alzon's life.

Not My Will, But Yours

A second lesson in the Christian practice of suffering: To succeed in saying as Jesus did: "Not my will, but yours." Father d'Alzon kept repeating tirelessly: "To want what God wants."

Besides, he demonstrated quite clearly by his own restless searching that it is sometimes hard to know what God wants. When he addressed his religious and his directees, he felt free to say: "God wants this of you." But when he grappled with what he himself had to endure, he often experienced perplexity.

He always had ups and downs in the matter of health. When he was twenty-four, he wrote: "I

am not precisely in ill health, except that a trifle upsets me.” He was never sure of the gravity or insignificance of some indispositions: “I cannot clearly discern what my health demands and what I must give to mortification.” And when he was almost forty: “If we listen too much to ourselves we end up by being capable of nothing... I listen to myself a lot... I have terrible remorse for being such a coward. Last Saturday I wanted to tell Our Lord that I was entrusting my health into His hands and that I wanted to go right ahead without pampering myself. And then yesterday I had such a strong neuralgic attack that I didn’t get up until 8:30. I could have gotten up earlier had I had the slightest generosity.”⁵

Generosity? Imprudence? It was never quite as clear-cut as he would have liked: “I don’t know what choice to make between too much and too little. I don’t want to exhaust myself and I am afraid of indulging myself too much. These uncertainties are rather troublesome.” He spoke to one of his directees about the “great acts of abandonment that we take back afterwards bit by bit.”

There is probably an echo of this battle for generosity in the harsh Chapter 10 of the *Directory* on mortification: “The religious are to know that upon entering the congregation they offered God the sacrifice of their life. Therefore their life no longer belongs to them; it must be of little concern to them whether it be long or short, provided it is used for the purpose willed by God.”

6

We always come back to this “willed by God,” which Father d’Alzon realized was sometimes hard to discern. Yet his obstinacy in seeking God’s will helps us to grasp vividly one of the most encouraging spiritual principles: *asking ourselves what the Lord wants places us within His will by the very fact that we are asking.* God will most certainly answer in one way or another our desire to do what he expects of us.

Besides, since this is a spiritual quest, it is by listening carefully to the Spirit that we are best able to trace our course as human beings in moments when the road becomes difficult to follow. Yet far from expecting God to dictate everything to us, we also need to surprise Him by the use we make of our freedom and our courage.

We have perhaps entered a despairing and terrifying night. At that point, there is no further search on our part. Only the prayer of Gethsemane. At first, a very humble, very human prayer: “Father, may I be spared this chalice.” Then the words that surrender a person in a mysterious but total way to God: “Not my will, but yours.” Words that Father d’Alzon repeated over and over

for four years.

Seeking Penance in Our Work

When we are in good health, should we make ourselves suffer by dint of voluntary penances? Father d'Alzon made use of the arsenal of his time, scourges, hair shirts, bracelets, and belts with sharp points. Yet he did not orientate his religious in that direction.

Certainly, he wanted them to seek austerity and penance, but in their work, in poverty, in bearing with various temperaments and maintaining the regularity of the religious life. Above all, he called on them to exhaust themselves in the service of God and of their brothers. Penance seemed necessary to him because it formed "men of character, better disposed to sacrifice themselves." Faithful to his fundamental principle, he placed penance *at the service of life* and he wanted penance to be practiced in the very midst of the experience of living: "Nothing extraordinary is to be done by way of mortification, but everything is to be done with mortification."

7

We have a typical application of this principle in the chapter of the *Directory* on meals (except for one exaggeration: "Do I go to the refectory as to the rack, after the example of Saint Bernard?"). The

Dir
ectory

reads: "No terrifying austerities but we must be content with what is served us, we must know how to stick to a schedule, arrive on time, and not expect food, even less drink, to compensate for forbidden pleasures."

8

When Mother Eugénie consulted with him on the matter of mortifications, he answered: "You must practice mortification that makes one suffer without jeopardizing health. It seems to me you can find that kind of mortification from morning to night... If we do not pay close attention as we go along, the body grows dull and becomes incapable of any generous effort."⁹

That is why he was violently opposed to comfort: "We plunge into the love of well-being and remain in it like dolts."¹⁰ He saw in austerity a certain self-mastery: "We strive to strengthen our

will by a more disciplined and austere life... When a man of little austerity has to decide between pleasure and duty, he chooses pleasure.”

Then he offers us another point of view on the rejection of comfort: a simple life husband's resources and enables us to share them with others. And to preach honestly about sharing! The person who accepts austerity is emancipated from the obsession to earn more money in order to attain the highest standard of living.¹¹

Walking With Love Amid Suffering

Once we have entered as positively as possible into suffering and austerity, how are we to accomplish day by day this work of courage and love that is destined to draw treasures of life from them?

Father d'Alzon was a man who made extensive use of certain Scriptural texts as words to live by. At the time his health had begun to give him concern, just before his attack, he had chosen as his motto the beginning of the Letter of Saint James: *“My brothers, count it pure joy when you are involved in every sort of trial. Realize that when your faith is tested this makes for endurance. Let endurance come to its perfection so that you may be fully mature and lacking in nothing”*
(Jm 1:2-4).

We note the linkage: as soon as a trial comes to us, we must mobilize our faith. It is a test of our faith. It is easy to believe in God and in life when everything is going well; but during trials our faith is driven into a corner, it must muster up endurance, patience.

Patience in itself does not tell the whole story. It might well be no more than fatalistic resignation and then nothing would happen. The patience we need must not be a withdrawal, but an awakening. What are these strange opportunities of loving? How shall I accomplish the “perfect works” of which Saint James speaks?

First we must learn to endure in such a way as to not lay too heavy a burden on the lives of others. This is a stern demand of love! DNC: Do not complain. Then perhaps we shall develop

that genial temperament that is the most chaste and sociable form of courage.

Suffering can transform a gentle person into a cactus. Father d'Alzon recommended great equanimity to a nun whose colitis made her crotchety: "Believe me, in any situation a religious can be charitable." This is more easily said than done, for he himself had to confess that because of his nerves he was becoming too irritable.

Another loving step forward amid suffering. He observed that suffering helps us to make tremendous progress in our trust in God. Even in the midst of suffering, even at this moment, I know that you love me, Lord. I am not afraid because you are there. To succeed in saying this kind of thing when our pain is excruciating or when a medical diagnosis panics us, is the pinnacle of our union with God.

It is a fact that physical suffering or a wounded heart can draw us powerfully back to God. This is one of the obvious riches suffering can hold for us. It is at once obvious and mysterious: what is the reason for these links between suffering and love? Father d'Alzon did not delve into this question (but has *anyone* gone very far along that path?). He simply points out two things. When suffering comes, especially out of a peaceful sky, a believer suddenly feels a thousand times more attentive to God, to the people around him, to all the sufferings of the world. His heart becomes more loving and outgoing.

A less pleasant observation is that we must hurry to develop our openness to love and constantly keep an eye on it. Otherwise the opposite will happen: suffering will imprison us in a self-concern indifferent to everything else. This egoism which is painful to witness attacks the aged especially, and progresses with frightening rapidity. And yet no one is safe from this self-imprisonment in affliction.

This is all the more regrettable because it makes us lose another beautiful and obvious value of suffering: it can make us grow immensely. Suffering purifies, it cleanses us of self-sufficiency, pettiness, meanness. Providing, of course, that we seriously set about this work of purification on which Father d'Alzon insists so much.

He looked upon this as "a purgatorial work." He wanted us to react here and now the way we shall react at that moment by telling ourselves: I deserved this purification; I accept it as being

necessary for me.

“Do I have any idea what I have to pay? In no way can I expect to fly right up to heaven. When the soul has not sufficiently prepared itself on earth to see God, there is a period of terrible purification between time and eternity. If I were to die, what would my purgatory be? And yet the slightest inconvenience terrifies me; I am not able to endure anything, I offer only with extreme repugnance some small fragment of the thousand merits that are made available to me in life.”¹

2

Nowadays this doctrine is somewhat under a cloud, but this does not take away any of its truth. What we live out here on earth fashions us for eternity. And love is the greatest sculptor of all; therefore, so is suffering when it begets love.

“I Bring You Forth in Sorrow”

As we know, Father d’Alzon committed all his powers to the apostolate. And so for him the time of trial, far from being a parenthesis, was a mobilization of his resources. He realized the apostolate and sufferings were closely linked. It sufficed to look at Jesus Christ on the Cross. In the words of Mother Marie Eugénie, “Our Lord had only His wounds to carry the whole world.”¹³ Sometimes our only resource as apostles is our illness or our old age. Then only a vigorous, fully-awakened faith can convince us that in this situation, more than ever, the apostolate is one of the “perfect works” to which Saint James invites us.

We might be tempted to think that in the apostolate everything happens through the splendid deployment of words and actions of a person. There is truth in this, for that is the description of Jesus in Galilee. But the most profound aspect of this work, the most universally efficacious, was accomplished by Jesus on the Cross. Every authentic apostle also accomplishes this work amid suffering. Writing to his first novices, Father d’Alzon said: “If you want to spread the kingdom of God, do not fool yourselves about it; you will have great disappointments, great persecutions, and great sufferings. What can be done by an apostle who has not suffered?”¹⁴

On the basis of his own experience he had the right to tell others that in apostolic work contradictions are not an obstacle. To the contrary! “You’re having trouble with your orphan girls? So much the better! A thousand times so much the better! What is a charitable work

without suffering? Where would the pains of childbirth be? Jesus Christ brought forth the Church on the Cross and you would like to carry out this orphanage program lying on a bed of roses?"¹⁵

He often recalled Saint Paul's words, which are the most enlightening ever said on suffering: when suffering is accepted and lived in the right way, it brings forth life. "*You are my children, and you put me back in labor pains until Christ is formed in you*" (Gal 4:19).

CHAPTER VIII

THE MAN OF PRAYER

Prayer? That's what goes on

between God and ourselves.

For Father d'Alzon, the purpose of prayer, indeed its only purpose, is to love God. Seen in this light, prayer is not an abstract obligation ("I said my prayers... I forgot my prayers"). Rather, it is what goes on between God and ourselves.

This concrete way of approaching questions that are often seen in a purely theoretical light came to him from his own life of prayer. He spoke a great deal about this subject in his spiritual writings (ten presentations) and in his letters. But he always started from what he himself was experiencing or what he observed in his directees. The spiritual master who is to teach us the prayer of adoration began his days (and what busy days!) with one or two hours of adoration. The apostle who will press us toward the prayer of petition knew what he had wrested from God.

From his own lived experience of prayer, he developed a spirit of prayer: "It is better to form the spirit of our mental prayer than to cast it in such a uniform mold that in the end it becomes an automatic operation."¹ Here we can already sense the warning against the formalism and routine that corrode any kind of prayer.

His spirit of prayer can be characterized by three demands that are not easily categorized, as one might differentiate various encounters with God. Father d'Alzon's spirit of prayer always demands three things of the person who wants to pray: *adoration*, *petition*, and *courage*.

First of All, Adoration

Writing to Mother Marie Eugénie, he said: "Your principal focus of attention must be union with God. The rest is only a means. The essential is to be greatly preoccupied with God. What I want of you is a powerful effort to focus your mind and heart on God in such a way that you let yourself be permeated in a sense with His substance." * ²

Everything that can be said about prayer in the last analysis consists in this desire for union: "Our vocation is to achieve the most intimate union with God. Mental prayer is purely and simply the means of achieving this union."³

There is prayer when there is a desire for union. The rest follows and has value in proportion to the desire. Often during prayer we are too much concerned with ourselves when we have come to communicate with God. Whenever our attention turns toward ourselves, that is always a sign of a lack of adoration.

Adoration or love? Is it not love that characterizes the prayer of Christians? Certainly, but an adoring love in which we treat God as God: "In our mental prayer we are not sufficiently permeated with the presence, the greatness, the being of God. God is Power (the Father), God is Light (the Word), and God is Love (the Spirit). We are always in Him, but we are in Him in a very special and unique way when we recollect ourselves in His presence. This presence should fill us with a sense of dependence that would give our mental prayer and our adoration a power that they don't have. We don't take God seriously. We give ourselves, we take ourselves back, we program our own life, we limit our sacrifices, we forget that God is our supreme Master."⁴

"Supreme Master." One of Father d'Alzon's great themes is this: the rights of God *because He is God*. But to think of His "rights" is not to evoke a tyrant; it is to place ourselves in the presence of the Supreme Being, the Absolute. Starting from there, we can of course follow different paths in our adoration and hence in our prayer. Letters exchanged between Father d'Alzon and Mother Marie Eugénie in their later years, in 1876, bring out these nuances.

He wrote: "I am very much concerned with forming Our Lord's friendship within me. Does this thought agree with your concerns on the rights of God? How can we deal with these awesome rights in light of their immensity? I thought it was wiser to proceed by way of love."

She answered: "I blame myself for not having sufficiently rendered the homage of trust and love to Infinite Goodness. Among all (God's) rights, is this not the one that we must honor the most?"⁵

So we are indeed dealing with rights, but the rights of Someone who loves us, *rights of love*. Then why not get rid of this disagreeable word and speak purely and simply of love? But what love? To say: "God loves us" and "I love God" boggles my mind. For God is God. When Father d'Alzon clarifies that he has proceeded "by way of love," we cannot forget his texts on adoration. Like all authentic men and women of prayer, he is obsessed by the immensity of the Being and the Mystery of the One whom we dare to encounter. Nothing more surely kills prayer than not to

remember that it is an extraordinary act: I am seeking you, I adore you, I love you....but who are you?

At the beginning of a meditation on mental prayer,⁶ Father d'Alzon cites Saint Augustine's *Confessions*,

(1:4 and 5) as an example of this struggle with the mystery: "Who are you, O my God? Never new, never old, always active, always at rest, seeking, although you lack nothing. But what am I saying, O my God, my life, my holy delight? And what can one say when one is speaking about you? Yet, woe to those who are silent about you, everything else they say is but a non-word. Who will make it possible for me to rest in You? Who will make it possible for me to see You enter my heart to inebriate it? Who are You for me? Who am I for You, that You ask me to love You?"

This desire to cleave to God through an ardent faith and a questioning love is the soul of all prayer. Many disappointments regarding mental prayer have their origin here. Mental prayer fails to be sufficiently adoration, it does not hoist itself first of all up to a lofty idea of God that would place us in such an attitude of joyous humility that we would forget our difficulties of the moment, the obstacles we face during prayer: "If we knew how to forget ourselves before God, and did not constantly think of what touches and offends us, we would plunge more deeply into this adoration, we would acquire the strength and the freedom to go wherever God wants us to be."⁷

The gaze of adoration can overcome another obstacle: we cannot make ourselves believe that God transforms us when we pray. Since we are too eager to act on our own, we do not stay close enough to God, we do not try to listen attentively, we do not allow ourselves to be fashioned. We must learn to remain under the sun of God. Father d'Alzon guided Mother Marie Eugénie along these lines: "Acquire the habit of placing yourself at Our Lord's feet, not telling Him many things or analyzing yourself, but simply listening to Him as much as you can, keeping yourself in readiness to do whatever He tells you, considering yourself unworthy to have Him say anything at all to you and accepting as your due that He say nothing... *Above all we must let God act.* Do not worry too much, and leave Him greater freedom to act. You are not willing enough to remain passive in your mental prayer."

8

He gave the same advice to Father Picard: "In order to pray we do not need to strain the mind. We must go to God simply, through the heart, in very profound adoration. We must gently rein in our mind when it is distracted, and then go ahead, adoring, loving the Being of God and

offering Him our nothingness.”⁹

Petition With a View to Action

Father d’Alzon would not be Father d’Alzon if his prayer consisted solely in listening, in adoring attention to God. His prayer is also and always a petition for light and strength with a view to action. Love is excellent, love is everything, but he wants action.¹⁰

Not any kind of action! Love-adoration explodes into energetic actions for God and for our brothers. In becoming a petition Father d’Alzon’s prayer remains in the presence of God’s majesty. What his prayer seeks to obtain is not confined to small needs. It opens itself to God’s pity on the crowds; it wants Jesus’ own power of action.

“Lord Jesus who while on this earth went out to search for souls one by one, who waited for Nicodemus during the night, for the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well, who entered the homes of those who called you and who counseled us to run after straying sheep, teach me how to pray for sick souls and for dead souls, give to my prayer the power your own prayer had so that I might continue your work!”¹¹

For Father d’Alzon the prayer of petition is theological. This should not surprise us. It is the cry of faith, hope, and love: I have faith in God, I want Him to be loved, I love those for whom I pray, but above all I hope. “If I pray, what obstacles shall I not overcome?” Here again is another of the linkages he loved so much: hope begets the prayer of wild trust, and from that prayer action springs forth. “Everything is in God’s hands, and, through prayer, we can obtain everything from these divine hands!”¹²

Unfortunately we abase the prayer of petition by begging for things that are too petty or by asking in a petty way. Here we must cite a superb page in which Father d’Alzon deploys his magnificence of heart: “I know that of myself I can do nothing but that through the grace of God I can do everything. This trust is one of the homages that touches God’s heart most. We proclaim His goodness and His power. Our misery is immense; His power is even more immense. He wants to deal with creatures who are not great in themselves but are made greater by their relations with Him. He wants to ennoble those with whom He communicates, providing they are willing to assume sentiments worthy of Him. That is how the work of

supernatural elevation is accomplished. Sentiments are divinized, trust is rooted in the excellence of the Being of our Father in heaven.”¹³

Why is the excellence of the prayer of petition suspect in our day? Perhaps because our skittish sense of human dignity has developed far from any knowledge of God and of adoration. There is a tendency nowadays to assume that men must do everything on their own without crying out for help. We seem to hate to ask, and we don't even think of doing so when we have lost the sense of who God is.

Father d'Alzon teaches us to make our petition spring from our adoration, regardless of the type of prayer and the temperament of the one who is praying. If yours is an active temperament, advance in adoration and then you will know how to ask for what you need to leap over the walls of the impossible (Ps 18:30). If you are more of a contemplative type, constantly examine yourself with respect to your fraternal charity and ask for the means of proving your love through service.

It is always hard to define the spirit of a congregation. In the case of the Assumptionist spirit, there are two unmistakable hallmarks to look for, providing both of them are always present: adoration and service. Father d'Alzon's prayer was foremost and always a prayer of adoration, and at the same time it was always apostolic: his prayer petitioned in order to work for the Kingdom with energies purified and multiplied a hundredfold by grace. He had obtained so much himself that he knew whereof he spoke.

When Father d'Alzon was conceiving a program of action or when he confronted some trial, it was never a matter of fighting alone, without a very explicit appeal to God. He prayed and had others pray. For example, he founded the Near Eastern Mission on the prayers he ceaselessly requested of all the young Oblate Sisters.

And yet the strong link he maintained between prayer and action also impelled him to shake those who never get beyond their prayer. Among his many warnings, perhaps the sharpest was given at the end of an examen on fraternal service: “Isn't my piety selfish?”¹⁴

The fact that selfishness can find a warm home in our prayer life is a sad commentary on our wretchedness. Father d'Alzon thought that awareness of this spiritual poverty should make our

prayer of petition descend to the depths of rushing lucidity (“Out of the depths I cry to Thee!”) from which to rise again in a very humble supplication: *Lord, have mercy!* This takes us out of our acting self, always a bit conceited, and brings us back to our very being, which is such an inferior hymn of adoration, such a paltry apostolic instrument: “Prayer is the cry of my wretchedness that stems from my sins. Prayer petitions, but it can expiate, it can purify me.”

15

While Father d’Alzon insisted strongly on the prayer of petition because he realized our very life depended on it, he also wanted us to know how to say *Thank you!* Magnificent expressions like *thanksgiving, prayer of thanksgiving,* may be at a disadvantage because they do not resonate like a very simple *Thank you.*

Take, for example, one of Saint Clare’s prayers: “*Thank you my God, for having given me life,*” It seems so beautiful that I am delighted to find an echo of it in Father d’Alzon: “God created us, and who thanks Him for it? God redeemed us, but who returns His love with love? So many of us humans will have spent our entire lives without thanking God.” Fortunately, he makes this wonderful comment: “Love is the best of all acts of thanksgiving.”

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The Courage to Pray

It is impossible not to notice that for Father d’Alzon, prayer—through adoration and petition—is always an act of courage. He was literally obsessed by the Biblical episode of Jacob’s wrestling with God. Imagine, taking on God! “*I will not let you go until you bless me*” (Gn 32:27). To meditate on the chapter of the

Directory

on prayer is to be permanently healed of the illusion that praying can be a flabby activity.

“Mental prayer is a battle between God and the soul, until the soul, subdued by God and purified by all the trials it may please God to impose upon it, attains to perfect union. I must not, therefore, find it surprising that mental prayer causes me to experience exhaustion, boredom, distaste, dryness, suffering. But it is important to overcome all these difficulties and to go to God the way He wants me to go to Him. Am I punctual with my mental prayer? Am I not often at mental prayer as if I were not there? Haven’t I wasted my time at it? It was a busy time, but busy with what? What were my ramblings? Am I not going to get lost in useless contemplations

that come to nothing in practical terms? If my disposition doesn't improve, if virtues do not develop, are not even my longest periods of mental prayer sterile?"¹⁷

We could multiply these calls to battle which shake equivocation and defeatism: "The problem is not to know if we engage in mental prayer with ease, but to know if we are really praying."

In his letters Father d'Alzon's tone is somewhat different. His appeals, while still urgent and obstinate, are humanized by the admission of his own difficulties. To listen to his disclosures about the peaks and valleys of his prayer is encouraging: "Everything is fine ... Everything is going badly." It shows us that the difficulties experienced in praying are part and parcel of all prayer.

God is asking me to pray a great deal. I am dry as a stick of wood. I find consolation only through an absolute disposition I find within myself to want everything God wants."

"I have extreme difficulty praying because of my distractions. I have chosen the method of meditating while reading or while slowly reciting my Office. This suits me quite well because as soon as a distraction arises I continue to read or to recite the Breviary. You don't know how painful it is when one becomes incapable of praying. How did the saints manage to work long and hard and still pray so much?"¹⁸

Two years before his death, he made his ultimate disclosure: "I strive to engage in mental prayer as much as possible. I simplify things as much as I can; my wish for you is that you, too, may become very simple in your prayer."¹⁹

This struggle of a lifetime gave him the right to insist whenever he saw that a life of prayer was about to founder for lack of courage.

"Hold fast and stubbornly to mental prayer in spite of all your repugnance, and place yourself under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Do not worry whether you are praying well or badly, just pray."

“I ask you to persevere in mental prayer and to make progress in it notwithstanding the winds and the tides.”

“Avoid daydreams, pray, that is worth a great deal more, but pray above all during dryness; pray to become a person united to Jesus Christ in your heart’s good fortune as well as in bad. If you really understand this science of prayer, you will soon become holy.”

“We do not pray enough. That robs our actions of all strength, and then we do them out of self-love and far from the spirit of God.”

His most beautiful letter on the struggle to pray well and on God’s work in mental prayer was addressed to a young woman religious the day after her profession: “I know of no better means of giving your heart to God than for you to become a young woman of great mental prayer. That’s hard, but it is in this struggle with God that we acquire strength, believe me. Only God can make you a saint, and that is why you must place yourself directly in His hand through mental prayer. You must become a new creature in Jesus Christ, and mental prayer will accomplish this miracle. It seems to me that it is impossible to be a true daughter of the Assumption if one is not at the same time a woman of mental prayer.”²⁰

CHAPTER IX

LOVING THE WHOLE CHRIST

“All the affectations

of my heart,

all the powers of my being

must strain toward Jesus Christ.”

Do we love Jesus Christ? This question defines Father d’Alzon. He examined and re-examined it in all its aspects. In 1855 when Mother Marie Eugénie wrote him a letter dealing with the Constitutions of the young congregation, she reminded him that ‘the specific hallmark of the Assumption consists in finding everything in Jesus Christ.’¹

The key word here is *everything*. Had she perceived some hesitancy on his part on this subject? She continues: “You were telling me that Our Lord would be your philosophy, your mysticism, your passion.” This remark, and even more the years of purification from 1854 to 1858, brought him back to the leitmotiv of his life: *a love of Our Lord so encompassing that everything can be loved within this love.* He would never stop repeating, “This says everything, to love Jesus Christ and everything He loves.” When, after his trials of 1859, he composed the Directory, its very first lines were flames of love.

“All the affections of my heart, all the powers of my being must be directed to Jesus Christ. That is my life. Is Jesus Christ everything to me?”²

“My all.” There can be no question of Jesus Christ *and* something else. Anyone who wants to be taught by Father d’Alzon confronts this most illuminating intuition, to be accepted as it is. Otherwise the sun sets and reading Father d’Alzon is shrouded in darkness. Jesus Christ is the sun, He is *everything* because He is the most encompassing reality. The following pages will simply be meditations on this idea: *in Jesus Christ everything is given to us and everything can be lived.*

Father d’Alzon sees our other loves within our love for Jesus Christ; they are illumined, purified and transfigured by this love. That is what he lived. One of his many reflections on the friendship that linked him to Mother Marie Eugénie gives us an example of this: “I asked myself why I demonstrated so little friendship toward you when I really had such great friendship for you in my heart. If I loved Our Lord a bit more I would feel capable of much greater openness, I would be much less embarrassed by an affection in which everything passed through him.”³ We can see the direction he was taking: he did not want his friendship for her to take precedence over what he was trying to live with Jesus Christ. “If I loved Our Lord a bit more...” Within this sun problems vanish, the blazing furnace purifies everything. Even so, it is necessary to really love and to love the real Jesus Christ.

Grasped by Christ

At twenty-one Emmanuel d’Alzon tried to define himself; he foresaw he would live “with eyes always fixed on Jesus Christ.” He meditated on a text that would be one of his favorites to the end, John 15: “*Yes, Lord Jesus, that I may be in you and you in me*”⁴ This yearning was still very new to him, but by the time he was forty-four love would finally dwell within him.

“Every day Our Lord takes more complete possession of me. It is a combination of earnestness, simplicity, dryness, painful tenderness, abandonment, terror, a renewal of the spirit of faith, but above all it is a need to love Jesus Christ very much and to love everything He loves.”⁵

We need to return to this idea of “loving everything He loved” which gives the love of Jesus Christ a special d’Alzonian quality.

At the Chapter of 1868 he made the proclamation that would become famous: "Yes, we are going to Jesus Christ; we affirm Jesus Christ in the face of those who deny Him, or detest Him, or abandon Him. We see denial, hatred, indifference as so many motives to surround Jesus Christ with a love which is more ardent, more active, more tender and more solemnly demonstrated love. In Him we love God; we proclaim His divinity; we love the man who is the most perfect of models and the tenderest of friends; we love the God-Man, who initiates us into the supernatural world. We love Him because He brings us to true light and true benefits, we love Him with the love of the earliest days that made St. Paul say: 'If anyone does not love the Jesus Christ, let him be cursed' (1 Cor 16:22)."⁶

When Father d'Alzon was 68, two years before his death, he sang a hymn of love in his meditations-testament: "Who is better than Jesus Christ? Who is more beautiful than Jesus Christ? Consider all the divine perfections. They are all to be found in Jesus Christ. Consider all the created perfections: They are all in Jesus Christ. If the solution of a scientific problem, the reading of a literary masterpiece, the sight of mountains and ocean fill the mind with wonder, what then is the effect produced within me by the contemplation of Jesus Christ? And when this Beautiful One loves us, gives Himself to us, descends to our nothingness to offer it an ever more abundant life, what is left to do except rush with immense love to the very depths of His heart? Unless one is damned, it is impossible to know Him and not love Him. To love Jesus Christ whom we know better each day, that is life. *'For to me, life means Christ; hence dying is so much gain* ⁹ (Ph 1:21)."⁷

How can we fail to call to mind the man who first revealed the same sense of being possessed by Christ: "*But those things I used to consider gain I have now reappraised as loss in the light of Christ. I have come to rate all as loss in the light of the surpassing knowledge of my Lord Jesus Christ. For His sake I have forfeited everything; I have accounted all else rubbish so that Christ may be my wealth... I am racing to grasp the prize if possible, since I have been grasped by Christ*" (Ph 3:7-13).

An Arduous Love

How can we be grasped? Father d'Alzon answers: meditate on the Gospel. Not only to love, but above all to understand that you are loved.⁸ Toward the end of his life, he jotted down this thought: "As a Christian, a priest and a religious, Jesus has called me His friend." And in a meditation, he wrote: "Let us contemplate Him on the cross when, as He was dying He said to us: Have I loved you enough? How can we not love the One who has loved us to this degree?"

We are more in the habit of saying: “My God, I love you” than of allowing ourselves to be penetrated by this extraordinary revelation: we are loved. Father d’Alzon joins these two movements. A better understanding of Jesus makes us persons who feel they are loved and who want to love.

Here we come back to his beloved idea: to love because we know and to know better in order to love better. It is the mark of his genius that he linked study to love, so that love might not be imaginary and study might not be an encounter without love. “He called me His friend!” Father d’Alzon does not want the desire to know Jesus better simply to plunge us into books; he often calls to mind other encounters: the cross, the Eucharist. And imitation! There is nothing like acting like Christ in order to know Christ.

Without these very concrete encounters, the study of Scripture and theology risks being only an algebra of the mysteries, far removed from the living Christ. He tells of his own experiences. The most decisive insights came to him during mental prayer, the way of the cross, Mass, long moments before the tabernacle. These were rays of love directed to love.

He knew the great problem with this love is that its object is the Invisible! He knew the struggles required to seek and maintain contact. “Find your joy in being like the sinful woman; in a lowly position, but as close to him as possible.”⁹ He reactivated faith in God’s mysterious Presence. Writing to Mother Marie Eugénie, he said: “Our Lord is in the depths of your soul through grace; He dwells there through faith, and even when you are experiencing the greatest dryness and desolation He is there in the depths of your being. And as He is always what He is, that is to say, God, He acts within your soul as your God. Yet it is very surprising that we humans are disposed to say: ‘I have God within me through His grace and His love. He is disposed to act within me as God with all His power, providing I abandon myself to Him’ and this certitude still does not satisfy us.”

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He entwines love and will, as we all must when love is arduous; “If I love Jesus Christ, I *must* constantly think of him.” I *must!*

Yes or no, do I love? I love but under what conditions? I neither see him nor hear him.

Let us not imagine we are going to live such a love, a love stripped of regular contacts, without recourse to every possible means of almost desperately resuming contact. If we do that, we shall succumb to the very thing that is tormenting us, namely: we know we are loved, we want

to love, and yet we sometimes spend almost an entire day without thinking of Jesus.

In a letter, he asked Mother Marie Eugénie: “Kindly tell me if it is easy for you to adore Our Lord living within you. Are you giving Him what is due Him in the depths of your will? Does He possess the very last fiber of your heart? When external helps are wanting, do you express your desire that He, your God, may be sufficient for you? Several times a day establish relations of love, adoration, contrition, trust with our Lord.”

He had simpler advice for a male religious who had submitted something rather complicated to him: “I do not believe the practices of which you speak are very necessary; I prefer a loving and trusting gaze at Our Lord, renewed as often as possible.”

Such views may elicit annoyance, rebellion. “Can God be sufficient for me?” No, I need my brothers! I need very visible, tangible presences and not a love made of dreams. St. John tells us: *“No one has ever seen God, yet if we love one another God dwells in us, and His love is brought to perfection in us — One who has no love for the brother he has seen cannot love the God he has not seen”* (1 Jn 4:12 and 20).

Father d’Alzon responded to reactions such as this by the way he lived. His was a life totally given, a life of service, of consuming fraternal concern. God knows how much he loved his brothers! But he belonged to the breed that seeks love at its source: *First of all God, always God*, and it is only from this love that a real and realistic fraternal love springs. Theoretical debates on the two loves camouflage the frightening question: *when all is said and done, do I love?*

There are certainly two roads to travel. There is the road of our times, first and above all fraternal love, Jesus Christ encountered in our brothers. Let us hurriedly say that it is the road that goes from men to God. But does this not amount to doing more talking than living? Otherwise, Christians would have shaped the world.

The other road is the one Father d’Alzon chose: *begin by loving Jesus Christ*. If you love Him, it is impossible not to assimilate some of His fraternal love, impossible not to be impelled by Him towards those whom He loves, for whom He came, for whom He suffered, and who are now incorporated into Him in the body of the Church. As we shall see, Father d’Alzon’s Jesus always

leads to the Church, to men and women gathered together to be saved and to save one another: "We shall ask the Spirit of love to unite us to God, to Jesus Christ, to our brothers."

11

It is a cascade, an unbroken chain. We must not let go of any love. The logic of this bursts forth. The more you love Jesus Christ the more you will give yourself as He did, like the saints of fraternal charity. "What impelled the saints who gave themselves to the sick, to education, to the poor? The charity of Christ."

13

The Whole Jesus Christ

So it is Jesus Christ who impels us toward our brothers, but it is *in Him* that we love them. Jesus impels us toward the Father and the Spirit, but it is

in Him

that we love them.

("Whoever has seen Me, has seen the Father"

Jn 14:9).

Who, then, is Jesus Christ? He is a whole world. We are about to discover what is most original about Father d'Alzon's face-to-face encounter with Christ, and again it will be under the sign of *totality*,

of

the whole.

Because Jesus Christ is a world, a universe, we must love

the whole Jesus Christ.

"What I love in Jesus Christ, it seems to me, is the whole and entire Jesus Christ."

13

The whole Jesus Christ is Jesus Christ contemplated as a fantastic universe: Jesus the Word, and hence the fathomless Trinitarian mysteries; Jesus of Nazareth, and hence the mystery of human life in its perfection; the risen Jesus, the mysteries of His glorified body and of His ecclesial body, the Church; the Jesus of the last days when through Him, God will be all in all.

Who can encompass so many aspects? But whom do we love if we do not embrace them? We are speaking of the God-Man, completely united to God and intimately united to all human persons. He is not positioned *between* these two worlds, as we sometimes imagine His

mediation to be, but fully in the one and the other. For the Trinity is in Christ, and all men and women are in Christ. Whom do we love when we love Jesus Christ? This question was the hunger and thirst of Father d'Alzon's life.

This hunger and thirst followed different paths during the course of his spiritual journey. In the beginning, he tended to see in Jesus primarily a model for his voluntarism: *I will do* this and that, after His example. He very soon progressed toward a more tender love and to an interiorization, to the Johannine indwelling: you are in Me and I am in you. Then during the terrible years of crisis he abandoned himself totally to the One who had become his life: "My life is Christ." From that time onward, he united all these faces of Christ. In the Jesus of the Gospels he contemplated the immense Christ, *the whole Jesus Christ*, the Trinitarian and the ecclesial Jesus Christ.

However, from his youth until his death, one thing remained immutable for him. The God in Jesus Christ held first place. The beginning of Chapter II of the *Directory* on "Love for Jesus Christ" bears the mark of his probing questions where essentials are concerned: "Am I sufficiently convinced that Jesus Christ is my God?"

14

He stresses this so much that when we hear him speak about the Jesus of the Gospels, we are tempted to retort: "Are you sufficiently convinced that Jesus is a man?"

I shall offer only one quotation. He compares the novitiate where Jesus "is formed" in the young religious to the time when Jesus was being formed in Mary's womb, and he immediately corrects himself. "This is not because the divine Master was not *perfect man* from the first instant of His conception, but because, in order to serve as our model, He willed to be subject *externally* to the laws of nature."

15

This comes dangerously close to the perennial Docetist temptation that finds it repugnant to admit a genuine incarnation with all its consequences.

Father d'Alzon is the man of John's *Prologue*: The Word descends. His descending Christology has difficulty accepting the whole human reality of Jesus, His progressive understanding of His being, of His mission and of the meaning of His death.

It must be admitted that for us the difficulty is quite the opposite but just as great, especially during these years of debate on the divinity of Christ. We tend to think first of the man Jesus and then ascend toward the mystery of His union with the Father, running the risk of stopping halfway, and therefore of being Arians (i.e. claiming that Christ is not completely God, not truly God).

The virus of Arianism is just as indestructible as the virus of Docetism. The whole history of research on Jesus Christ bears the marks of the ebb and flow of the two tendencies: emphasis on the divinity when one descends from the Trinitarian mystery, and emphasis on the humanity when one ascends toward this mystery. And yet it is the nature of the mysteries of our faith to be subject to scrutiny only at the price of periodic fluctuations.

Getting acquainted with Father d'Alzon gives us the opportunity, if we need it, of restoring the balance in our understanding of Jesus the Man by an understanding of Jesus-God. "If I love Our Lord, I must constantly think of Him, but since He is God, it is above all as God that I must constantly have the thought of Him present to my mind and in my heart."¹⁶

An Intensely Trinitarian Spirituality

It was quite natural for Father d'Alzon, inasmuch as he saw Christ first and above all as God, to develop an intensely Trinitarian spirituality. "When shall I go to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, through Jesus Christ?"¹⁷ To love "the whole Jesus Christ" meant first of all to live through Christ this mystery of the Three that is the hallmark of Christianity among all the world's religions. It is a mystery, alas, that nourishes all too little the faith of Christians.

Father d'Alzon, for his part, moved with ease amid the Trinitarian relations, without falling into the minimalistic tendencies that have sprung up throughout the history of Christianity. Among such tendencies is the exclusive infatuation with *Jesus alone* (what has been called "*Jesusism*")
Then
there is devotion to the Holy Spirit practically alone. Again there is the more widespread compact notion of a God who is so completely
one
that Jesus and the Holy Spirit disappear in the unending return of deism.

For Father d'Alzon such approaches were unthinkable, precisely because of his conception of *the whole Jesus Christ* who, by reason of His divine nature as the Word, necessarily places us in contact with the Father in the Holy Spirit.

Here is the way Father d'Alzon expressed his Trinitarian faith: "The love that unites God the Father and God the Son is God himself, and it is through this love, the love that is the Holy Spirit, that I can love God: *'the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us'* (Rm 5:5). God the Father has given me His Son; God the Son has given Himself to me and given me the love that unites Him to the Father; He has made me the temple of this love. My heart is a sanctuary where God has deposited His love that is God. What must my heart be like? Where shall I henceforth find any room for a sentiment that cannot be set ablaze by God's love?"

18

A major difficulty remains that perhaps explains the apathy of so many Christians toward Trinitarian doctrine and devotion. * In order to understand and pray to the Trinity, we must use our imagination without imagining too much; we must make deductions without deducing too much. We must go from the One to the Other without ceasing to reach out to All. We must go in a different way to the Father, to the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In the face of these differences, how can we maintain the equality and above all the unity of the Three Persons? And if we succeed in maintaining unity, are we not inclined to return to the simple "Creator" of the deists?

Father d'Alzon, who liked things to be well-defined, delineated his Trinitarian world in this way: to the Father he attributed power and creation; to the Son, light, truth, redemption; to the Spirit, love, sanctification.¹⁹ Here is a typical text: "Let us seek God, the eternal goal of our being; let us learn to know Him in the light of His Son; let us be enkindled by the flames of the Holy Spirit." It is of course possible to live the mystery of the Trinity in some other way, while retaining the primordial intuition: *Jesus Christ is never alone* (cf. Jn 8:16); He always leads us to the Father through His Spirit.

Father d'Alzon's entire spirituality radiates from this center: Jesus-God. Referring to education, he dared to say: "When we have set our young people on the path that leads them to the perfections of the God-Man, we shall have given them the most admirable preparation for life."²⁰ To anyone who thinks he exaggerates the importance of knowing Jesus Christ, it suffices to point out all that comes to d'Alzon's mind when he thinks of *the whole Jesus Christ*: the invitation to His great love, the journey toward this face-to-face encounter. Realizing we

have been born for that!

CHAPTER X

THE THREEFOLD LOVE

“The spirit of the Assumption

is summed up in these few

words: love of Our Lord, of

Mary, His Mother, and of the

Church, His Spouse.”

Loving the Whole Jesus Christ has turned us first toward His Trinitarian life. We shall now focus our attention on the other part of His mystery: His human life. Father d'Alzon long pursued an intuition which was to become a hallmark of his spirituality. When he was 44 he wrote: "I need to love Jesus Christ very much and
everything that Jesus Christ loves."¹ Who and what does

Christ love? His Mother and His Church.

From that time on, Father d'Alzon was to cleave to this trilogy which may indeed surprise us but which we must pause to consider. For, in a very official way, he made of it the summation of his spirit by placing it at the beginning of his *Directory*: "The spirit of the Assumption is summed up in these few words: love of Our Lord, of Mary, His Mother, and of the Church, His Spouse."

²

We might imagine he was juxtaposing three different loves, the first, immense and primordial, Jesus Christ; the next, secondary, Mary; and the third of an entirely distinct order, since love of an entity like the Church is very different from the impetus toward Jesus and Mary.

That's not what he had in mind, and Father d'Alzon gives us the key to his thought: "All the powers of my being must reach out toward Jesus Christ. And I must love, *for love of Him*, what He loved most. Now these two great affections of Our Lord on earth are Mary, His Mother, and the Church, His Spouse."

³

We are in the presence of Jesus of Nazareth, we are looking only at Him; there is no question of aligning several loves, but of seeing how our love for Jesus unfurls quite naturally into a threefold love. For when we love Him, we want to love what He loves. To know Him as intimately as possible, we enter into His human heart. It is from this heart that we go toward Mary and the Church, in order to love them because He loves them and the way He loves them.

This draws us away from the famous formula: "To Jesus through Mary." Let us dare to say "To

Mary through Jesus” in the spirit of Father d’Alzon, knowing that this simply means: let us try to see why Jesus loves Mary and how He loves her. Obviously this keeps us in Jesus’ presence.

Besides, it liberates us from a delirious and false Marian devotion. How can anyone think we can glorify Mary by withdrawing her even temporarily from the glory that comes to her only from Jesus and from Jesus’ gaze at her? That is Father d’Alzon’s intuition. He wants to look at Mary the way Jesus looks at her. She was the first object of His affection, together with Joseph, and she was Jesus’ first disciple. To contemplate her is to know what we must be to be pleasing to Jesus. Can there be a deeper, sounder Marian devotion?

No praise will ever equal this thought: *she was pleasing to Him in every way*. This woman’s heart contains everything we can imagine that is most perfect and most delicately sensitive in the life of a wife and mother. Indeed her life was very different from what we would have programmed for a maternity such as hers. The greatest of all women led an unimaginably simple life. At Nazareth (the tiny Nazareth of her day!) she was Mary and nothing more. During Jesus’ public life no mother could have been more discreet. And yet what intimate harmony with Him, what prompt responses to His calls, which were also very discreet. Father d’Alzon wanted to come a little closer to this ineffably unique love.

Mary draws us to Jesus’ heart; the Church leads us to His hands. For Father d’Alzon the Church is Jesus at work, Jesus creating the great work in which He invites us to participate.

At the beginning of the eleven circulars of the 1876 Chapter, four years before his death, Father d’Alzon worked out a synthesis that evokes the threefold love, the theological virtues, and the apostolate, with the interrelations he loved.

“We adore Our Lord, eternal Word, infinite truth, with a deep *faith* in revelation. We view our devotion to the Blessed Virgin—whose virtues we consider models of inner-life and prayer—in the context of *hope*. As for *ch*
arity,
we seek its growth through our zeal for the defense and triumph of the Church. These three characteristics call for a triple action and, as it were, for a triple apostolate. The love of Our Lord Jesus Christ should instill in us the desire to make Him known through teaching and preaching. The filial devotion to the Blessed Virgin should prompt us to help direct and sanctify those souls which are called to a certain degree of perfection, a work which seems to be far too neglected in our time.

I have already broached some of these questions with you. Moreover, the meditations I am presently composing would be of some use, at least to the younger ones among us, as examples of the ideas with which you should be nourishing yourselves and of the way in which you should make use of them later on to nourish the souls entrusted to your care.

What I would *like to stress today*, in the context of your love for the Church, is the need to dedicate yourselves to those apostolates which are best suited for countering the attacks to which she is particularly subjected.”
4

In other words, to love the Church is to work with Jesus Christ, under His gaze and within the ambit of His gigantic work of salvation. It would be rather stupid to make a fuss over a few details when the task is so vast. Our love for the Church will find its justification and its inspiration not in defending her for her own sake or imagining she fits in with our views but by asking how Jesus wants the Church to be, how He looks at her. If all Christians were willing to look at the Church with Jesus' eyes perhaps they would speak about her and work for her more earnestly but they would surely do so with greater love. I am reminded of a book written by a Catholic woman, entitled *The Church, abusive mother!* It is a pity the author did not know the doctrine of the threefold love.

The threefold love is simply an original way of knowing Jesus Christ better. In the preceding chapter we discovered the Jesus-God of the Trinitarian mystery. We shall now go on to discover Jesus the man, Jesus of Nazareth.

I. Jesus of Nazareth

*“Have I taken the Gospel seriously?”*⁵ Father d’Alzon did not delve much into Christology, psychology, or even exegesis to learn about Jesus. He plunged directly into the entire Bible with love’s eagerness. We have become more critical. Biblical science has made enormous progress and that is a great benefit—providing we are willing to be nourished by it! Father d’Alzon’s questions now take on a new power: “What have I done with so many insights? What efforts have I made to meditate on this doctrine, to apply it to myself, to nourish myself with it?”

6

For Father d'Alzon, meditation on the Gospel is the most powerful awakener to the love of Jesus Christ.⁷ He gives two reasons for this. First, *from one detail to the next*, whether a gesture or a word spoken, we get to know Jesus better, and we recall Father d'Alzon's logic about that: the better we know, the more we love. And, he insistently adds, the Gospel seen *in its entirety* reveals how immensely Jesus loves us. No assiduous reader of the Gospel can remain untouched by this love.

Although Father d'Alzon tirelessly perused the entire text of the Gospel, he obviously had his favorite pages. These were the Annunciation and the Passion. When we consider that he speaks very little about the Resurrection, we realize we are far richer than he on this point. Besides, after giving eighteen lectures on the love of Jesus Christ, in which he had retraced the whole journey from the Annunciation to the Resurrection, he himself specified how his commentaries were to be used: "I have merely staked out a few guidelines: it's up to you to reread the Gospel with the thoughts I have suggested to you. When you think I have been mistaken in my applications, you are to seek those best suited to your own soul and in which you can find the most direct communication with our Lord."⁸ The great principle has been given: look above all to the Gospel for contact with Jesus. But it would be unforgivable for us not to have recourse, according to the level of our education, to the commentaries of the exegetes who labor to make our reading a hundred times richer.

II. Mary

When Father d'Alzon speaks of Mary, he always sees her as a powerful *helper* and the unsurpassable *example* of union with Jesus Christ: "Mary is our mother and our model."

Some rare disclosures on his part tell of his devotion. When he was twenty-one, he advised his beloved Luglien "to pray hard to the Blessed Virgin because she is the mother of all purity."⁹ He would never cease recalling the bonds that exist between Mary, purity and vocations. There can be no doubt that here, once again, his conviction was rooted in his own experience and in what he saw around him. While some lives were being destroyed by impurity, others held fast to the absolutely unique limpidity (Father d'Alzon's own guilelessness) in which Mary's influence was manifest.

When he was thirty-five, he noted progress in his love for Mary: “My devotion to the Blessed Virgin increases every day,” he wrote to Mother Marie Eugénie, “and you can boast of having contributed to it.” A year later he wrote: “I would never have believed I could love the Blessed Virgin so much.”¹⁰

This love remained very strong until the very end, as the following words expressed on his deathbed reveal: “My dear Brothers, you know that after God and the Blessed Virgin you are the ones I have loved most in the world.”¹¹

In his preaching he demonstrated praiseworthy restraint, in view of the fact that he lived in what has been called the century of Mary. It was the century of the miraculous medal, 1836; La Salette, 1845; Lourdes, 1858; Pontmain, 1871. One sentence sums up his thinking: “In order to know the Blessed Virgin, the Gospel suffices.”¹²

As was his custom, he turned his attention to ways of living his devotion: “Has not my devotion to Mary consisted in a few formulas, or a few sterile sentiments? Have I really grasped the wonderful relationship which, through Jesus, could exist between Mary and me?”¹³ It should be noted that the “through Jesus” places us firmly within the threefold love.

Relations with Mary? The first is obviously the relationship between a son and his mother, and it needs no comment. Is there a Christian who has not experienced the sweetness and consolation of having as his mother the woman endowed by God with all maternal perfection? Father d’Alzon never missed an opportunity to call to mind the essential link between every Christian and Mary: “The love of the Son leads us to love of His Mother. Our tenderness for the Most Blessed Virgin has no limits, any more than does her tenderness for us.”¹⁴

The second relationship is one of admiring contemplation. If life means being united to God, what an extraordinary and encouraging model she is for us! “Through her union at every instant with Our Lord, the Blessed Virgin attained the sublime perfection that made her so pleasing in God’s eyes. She is the model of souls who have a common everyday vocation, and they are the most numerous. There was nothing extraordinary in her life except this extraordinary unity with her son.” The result of this unity is that we discover Jesus in the thoughts, sentiments, and actions of Mary.¹⁵

The third relationship, therefore, is one of imitation. She is the model of models, and above all the model of faith: “Mary merited to become the Mother of God by the most sublime act of faith any creature could ever make when she cooperated with all the power of her being in the mystery of the Incarnation. Faith can bring about an analogous mystery within me.”¹⁶

The *incarnating* power of faith is one of Father d’Alzon’s great themes. Through Mary’s faith, the Word becomes incarnate within her; through our faith, Jesus Christ can live within us. We shall come back to this *mystical incarnation*. And yet if Father d’Alzon dares to pass from Mary’s faith to ours, it is with a warning: our surrender to God by *fiat*, by a “yes” uttered in faith, must not be done in a weak and hesitating way. Lord, since you say so, I believe it, *be it done to me according to your word!* (Lk 1:38).

One aspect of Mary’s spirituality impressed him in a special way: her meditative interiority. To enter into God’s plans demanded not only a trusting faith but a patient faith. Understanding this strange son must not have been easy. The Gospel’s allusions to Mary’s perplexities are a precious lesson for progress in our faith. Here, however, we are actually parting company with Father d’Alzon. He, for his part, sees Mary totally filled from the start with the light on the Trinity!¹⁷

We prefer to consider Mary’s life a succession of perfect responses to progressive insights from above. She was taken by surprise, “meditated in her heart,” and then took another step forward.

Mary is our supreme model in this manner of responding to graces received. Mary the believer, Mary the patient one, was also Mary the faithful one: “Mary was inundated with blessings, but she responded to them.”¹⁸ When she said: “I am your servant,” what happened to her made these modest words the most heroic “Yes!” of fidelity. A fidelity that would persevere to the end, to the foot of the Cross.

After the Annunciation, Father d’Alzon’s second greatest encounter with Mary was there, at the Cross. “In her mother’s heart, the noblest of hearts, what an increase in love since the Annunciation within her exquisitely receptive nature, in her role as a mother, and under the action of God who had chosen to love this creature more than every other that would ever come from His hands. A mother’s love, the love of the most perfect of mothers, the love of the Mother of God, a mother’s love multiplied by all the graces God can pour into the heart of the woman He has chosen as His Mother: that was Mary’s heart. And at the moment of Jesus’ death, her heart was her executioner. The more perfect Mary was, the more cruelly she suffered. The

more ineffable the divine object of her love, the more it made her suffer. I get lost in the depths of these sufferings and these loves. When indeed shall I in my turn, at the foot of the Cross, by Mary's side, learn to suffer by striving to love?"¹⁹

Finally, Father d'Alzon saw Mary as the Immaculate, the Virgin of the Annunciation and Our Lady of Sorrows. He was not inspired by the mystery of the Assumption. He commented that his congregation bore the name of the Assumption only because it was born in the College of the Assumption in Nîmes. When he wanted to speak of the "great and fruitful lessons of Mary in her Assumption," he referred once again to Calvary.²⁰

How did Father d'Alzon commune with Mary? He made a point of celebrating Marian feasts in a special way. "I want to strive to begin a new life the day of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin. Strive to be reborn with her on September 8th."²¹ He saw the Rosary as a Marian school of the virtues: "The Rosary reminds me of the principal mysteries in the lives of Jesus and His Mother. If I recite it with attention, it can become for me a kind of review of the virtues. I examine how I practice them, wherein I fail, and I ask for the grace of acquiring the virtues that I do not yet possess. I converse with Mary about these virtues and about the perfection of her Son. The Rosary ought to help me to penetrate more intimately into the life of Jesus and Mary." On the other hand, he had no illusions about the dangers of routine.

"Hail Mary's

are multiplied without attention, and with all the distractions one can muster, with the result that this prayer is merely a mechanical operation when serious meditation could do us so much good."

²²

There is still another aspect, the most original of all, to his Marian devotion: the search for vocations. "Our love for the Blessed Virgin dedicates us to the devoted search for virginal vocations. And if we are criticized for unduly promoting these vocations, we shall answer that our only regret is that we do not promote them enough."²³

This aggressive note reminds us that Father d'Alzon was the terror of the fathers and mothers of Nîmes. He had the reputation for being a formidable awakener of vocations. He noted bitterly that everyone did not share this passion: "How many religious could call others to the religious life if they had the zeal for it."²⁴ This struggle took on such importance in his life that it gave rise to the following colorful episode, among others.

Father d'Alzon had been violently accused of having snatched Dr. Barre, a prestigious surgeon in Montpellier, from the practice of medicine, whose priestly vocation aroused storms of protest. D'Alzon responded in a thunderous sermon on vocations of which we can only give a few excerpts here:²⁵

“Indeed! You complain about the departure of Dr. Barre because he is too highly skilled, too useful, too well-known in his profession to abandon it in order to become a priest. What a perfidious, false, unjust doctrine, devoid of generosity, offensive to Divine Providence. So you want to fling to God what you don't like? What is of no use to you? Let Him have what is vile, ugly, repulsive, and deformed, both morally and physically; let us hold on to whatever is perfect and attractive.

“Alas, many Catholics think and act like worldlings: there is God's portion and the portion of the world or the devil. God's portion is always the most niggardly one. Is this girl ugly? Let her go to the convent to be the spouse of Jesus Christ! Here is a rich, beautiful and accomplished girl: she must be kept to adorn society. If she feels the call to the religious life, this vocation must be smashed. By what right would God want to deprive us of this charming creature? Let Him take the younger sister who is cross-eyed and is not very bright. We shall then submit to His will.

“I tell you very frankly, I like deformed bodies as much as the others, because of the souls they envelop, because these souls bear the mark of the royal blood of my Savior. But I shall strive throughout my life to give God whatever I can find that is most perfect among the sons and daughters of men, as soon as I discover the sign of a vocation.”

III. The Church

Mary and the hierarchical Church, the Pope and the bishops, hold an important place in the life and writings of Father d'Alzon. If we did not refer constantly to his doctrine of the threefold love, we could be misled as to his true views.

His dominant concern was God and the great cause of God, the salvation of the world. The threefold love acts within this essentially apostolic plan: Christ is the Father's envoy for the salvation of the world. Mary and the Church are at the service of this mission. When we remain within these horizons, any disconcerting insistence retains its relative aspect, obviously linked to

circumstances.

In Nîmes, Father d'Alzon was confronted by a form of Protestantism, fragile in its internal coherence, organization and doctrine, but vigorous whenever it set itself against Catholics. This combative atmosphere impelled Father d'Alzon to emphasize what the Protestants of the Gard region rejected most: Mary, the Pope, and the Eucharistic host. It was also in the face of the Protestant fragmentation that he saw more clearly the importance of the Pope and the bishops for the unity of the Church. And how can we fail to see that the very troubled history of the papacy at that time, with its hours of distress and its moments of glory (Vatican I!), left its mark on a man as chivalrous as Father d'Alzon?

The remarkable thing is that at a time when the Catholics of France tended to place undue emphasis on Marian devotion and to see the Church above all in terms of authority, hierarchy and very dry dogmas, Father d'Alzon retained very broad views and deeply spiritual and passionate concerns: service to all men, developing communion among them, spreading the faith, a faith that was also love.

This explains his attraction to the mystery of the Compassion, for this is the most visible role of Mary in the work of salvation. In his own words: "Mary was the purest of creatures only in order to be, through her compassion, the most perfect collaborator with Christ."

He saw Mary as the apostle par excellence, the one who could have uttered St. Paul's cry: "*You are my children, and you put me back in labor pains until Christ is formed in your*" (Gal 4:19).

26

That is also the Church's great cry.

The similarities between Mary and the Church and the bonds that unite them have often been emphasized. Father d'Alzon contemplates them both only within the redemptive activity of Christ. Mary is the first person to be saved, begotten to salvation and bringing forth to salvation. She is thus the perfect model of our life in Christ. We receive salvation by participating in the salvation of all. The aggregate of the redeemed-redeemers constitutes the Church, and this Church never ceases admiring in Mary the total success of the Redemption. That is the meaning of the mystery of the Assumption, which is a reality and sign of the glory to which we are all called.

Just as through Mary, Jesus became incarnate in the flesh of a man, through the Church He becomes mystically and progressively incarnate in the flesh of all humankind, and that is the Church. *The Father has given us Christ who is above all things, "to be the head of the Church which is His body and the fullness of Him who fills the universe in all its parts"* (cf. Ep 1:21-23).

27

Father d'Alzon adopted as his own the Augustinian doctrine of *the whole Christ*: Through the Church, Christ wants to be united to all men and to unite them among themselves. The Church is humanity on the road to Christification. To love the Church is to love Christ in His all-embracing work and in His action within the world here and now. When anyone says: *"Jesus Christ, yes, but the Church, no,"* he or she is refusing to accept the total mystery of Christ.

There are those who will object that they are not rejecting the Christic mystery, but rather the Church as institution, the cumbersome bureaucratic machine, the spotlighting of the Pope. In contrast to these feeble loves that find it hard to accept the debatable aspects of any kind of incarnation, Father d'Alzon joined the invisible and the visible in one vigorous love, the Church the body of Christ and Rome together with the Pope.

Father d'Alzon went to Rome nine times, and that says a great deal to any Catholic who has ever shouted *Long live the Pope!* on St. Peter's Square. Rome was linked to three great moments in Father d'Alzon's life: his ordination, his missionary projects, the excitement and broad horizons of a Council. For him the Church was an immense reality but encompassing such diversity that its unity was always in danger. He saw the Pope as the man of unity, and the crowds that acclaimed him as the palpable sign of a universal communion of which each little community should be a mini-expression.

And yet the crowds of Rome turned his thoughts back to the crowds without Jesus Christ: *"I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold"* (Jn 10:16). This is the road he was to follow especially after 1870. As he saw it, the Church gives Jesus Christ to all the people; she fights so that no one, whether bourgeois, intellectual, or anarchist, will snatch God from the people.

Even when here or there the Church is less faithful in serving the lowly, still as a whole she fights the good fight. To love the Church is to dedicate oneself to a formidable cause for which “young people must be filled with zeal.”²⁸ Is this a rather blind enthusiasm? Not at all. From his first contact with Rome at the age of 24, Emmanuel d’Alzon foresaw that his love would have to overcome more than one disappointment. He expressed the famous aphorism: “Work for Rome, sometimes without Rome, never against Rome.”²⁹

The First Vatican Council was to fill his lungs with the wind of Catholicism. This catholicity, this universality was no longer an abstract word. It was the throng of bishops who had come from all parts of the world to this first truly ecumenical Council, since representatives of the five continents were there. He commented:

“Yesterday an American bishop offered me a school in his country. Then Father Galabert left his Bulgarian bishop so he and I could lunch with a Spanish bishop. This morning an Alsatian bishop ordained a young black to the subdiaconate in our chapel. Saturday I attended a meeting of some twenty persons. Present were a French bishop, the patriarch of the Armenians, a patriarch of Antioch, the Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, and the Archbishop of London. They are coming from all points of the compass. You see how much we must love this Church which is so truly Catholic.”³⁰

The tendency of French Catholics to look constantly to Rome, *beyond the mountains*, has been called *ultramontanism*.

Father d’Alzon was an ultra-ultramontanist. And yet in spite of a few excesses,

³¹

we need to see what he, the perfect connoisseur of the Church of France, saw: the authoritarianism of each pastor within his parish, the authoritarianism of the Gallican bishops in their dioceses in the style of Dupanloup. Because appeal to the Pope broke up these little worlds, it was in this very concrete situation a guarantee of a broader ecclesial life and of freedom from local tyrannies.

It was also a guarantee of unity. It’s all very good to sing *One Lord, one faith*, but the unity of such a gigantic agglomeration demands a certain discipline of thought and action: “By our teaching we will devote ourselves to forming Catholics who are deeply attached to the Church, and to show the necessity of a living unity not only in the matter of dogma but of discipline as well, under the ever-more respected leadership of the Sovereign Pontiff. One of the reasons for being of our little Association consists in the efforts of its members to bring minds and hearts closer, through teaching, to the common center that Jesus Christ has given His Church... The

Church is one in her doctrine because she has a universal teacher, and, among the peoples, teachers who submit to the supreme head of the teachers... We will practice our faith by our unlimited submission, not only to the teaching of the Church but to the spirit of this teaching, by our submission to the Sovereign Pontiff, and we will eagerly comply with all his known intentions.”

32

The links are clear: Jesus Christ, the Church, the teaching of the Church, the Pope. But what reader of our own time can fail to think of certain texts originating in Rome that have divided men's minds instead of promoting unity? To be faithful to the Pope in the spirit of Father d'Alzon, must everyone obey without discussion?

It seems to me we must distinguish here between a spirit and a man. The spirit? A love of the Church that is concretized among other things by service to unity: “One faith.” The man? An incurable monarchist, a disciplined “colonel,” he considered himself to be “a man of principles rather than a scholar.” He was well aware of the danger of centralization: “Let Rome not stop at the conservative element of her mission; let her accept the duty of taking vigorous initiatives.”³³

Yet viscerally, he was more inclined to proclaim things that were certain and hence commonplace, than to engage in intensive research that engenders complication, uncertainty, and often division: “The action I am proposing to you is based on ideas, on the principles of our faith. These ideas must be diffused; this doctrine must be made accessible.”³⁴

Father d'Alzon belonged to the race of disseminators of truth. As such, he necessarily looked for the authoritative statement, the irrefutable document, the unified discipline. “As the old shepherd said when the Republic was proclaimed: ‘I have never seen sheep well led when there was more than one shepherd.’ If we want everything to be in order, we must cleave to the supreme leader. What assurance and what light for your behavior, your studies, your doctrine! I lived in the diocese of Nîmes for fifteen years before it adopted the Roman liturgy. There were so many variations in the ceremonies that one bishop asked me what rite we were following. I answered: ‘We are following the master of ceremonies.’ Now that we have the Roman rite, everything is settled, decided in advance; we need only to consult. Well, that's it. The entire certitude of doctrine flows from the Holy See. It is one of the aberrations of our time to launch out into very hazardous ideas. Hold no doctrines other than those that come directly from the center of the Church, one in her faith.”³⁵ *One in her faith?* It seems to me that we can maintain this concern without so much distrust for theological research.

Following Father d'Alzon will strengthen our filial obedience to Rome in matters of faith: "Lord, what do you want to tell us in this text by the Pope, in this decision, in this orientation?" Yet this must not prevent us from also thinking: "Lord, what do you want to tell us through these theologians, these exegetes?"

We can go still further. Since Vatican II we have been becoming more aware of the action of the Holy Spirit in the entire Church. The Holy Spirit does not operate solely through the Pope, or through the hierarchy. He is at work within the entire body of the faithful. Faith can be sought and can progress through the life of Christian communities. The world and its conscience is a theological locus. The hierarchy remains the responsible guardian of the faith, but the guardian does not do everything alone, and does not live out everything alone.

We must now approach another aspect of the concern for unity: the problem of our separated Christian brothers. This problem troubled Emmanuel d'Alzon from his youth. No one could live in southern France without being affected by the hostility that was rampant between Protestants and Catholics.

Father d'Alzon's reaction was the following: "The Protestants must be converted." During his stay in Rome he had come into contact with the Anglicans. Again the same reaction: How to bring them back to Rome? As for the Near Eastern Mission, it was in line with the plan "to extinguish the schism" through missions and the reform of the Eastern clergy. Does this make Father d'Alzon a pioneer in the field of ecumenism?

Father d'Alzon never knew the word "ecumenism," nor even the spirit that motivates the present ecumenical movement. He became thoroughly involved in the cause of unity and this was a new concern. But he perceived unity as the "return to the sheepfold." Anglicans, Protestants and Orthodox Christians were to rally around a Roman Church which would be very happy to welcome them and do everything to this end. He never doubted for an instant that since the Roman Church possesses the whole truth, the others have nothing really useful to offer.

In actual fact, ecumenism is characterized by an entirely different attitude, one that was unthinkable in Father d'Alzon's day. It calls for dialogue among the Churches as they face one another and bring together their respective riches of thought and life. Today the watchword is no longer: "Come to us," but rather: "Let us try to find a way of living together."

Given the state of the question in his own time, Father d'Alzon could work for unity only insofar as it was directed toward a return to Rome. At the same time, he was truly a pioneer because of the importance he attributed to the effectual search for unity. It is precisely by observing his activity that we can more clearly perceive the illumining grace of openness to another ecclesial unity characterized by dialogue.

D'Alzon understood the crisis of French Protestantism in the 19th century, and he realized it was unthinkable to expect to dialogue with a group that was in the state of complete disintegration. He came closer to dialogue with the Anglicans. He pondered the question and may well have dreamed of being the man of reconciliation. When he was disappointed in this hope, he pursued another great dream: the end of the Eastern Schism.

It should be noted that in all these efforts, Father d'Alzon adopted the method that was to become one of the marks of present-day ecumenism: thorough understanding of the positions of the various Churches. "To know in order to love," his great principle, was to serve in an area where it is essential to be well enough apprized of the differences to succeed in loving those that can be accepted.

Exploration of Father d'Alzon's love for the Church could go on and on. Besides, we cannot fail to note a kind of obsession on his part: the role the Church must play in the evolution of the world. He loved to hoist himself up on the watchtower. One would need to reread his great discourses.³⁶ They offer guidelines for analysis and action that retain their interest today.

1. An outmoded world is disappearing.

2. A world is being born.

3. How will the Church, and hence all Christians, fit in with these changes?

CHAPTER XI

LIVING THE EUCHARIST

“The Eucharist gives us

the whole Christ.”

As we begin this Chapter on the Eucharist, we must remember more than ever that with Father d’Alzon we are dealing with religious experience. A spiritual man is speaking to us, sharing his own experiences. So now we are going to plunge into a practice that is very “19th century” and might trouble us if we were to fix our attention on one or another of its details.

Overall, Father d’Alzon gives us a lesson in *Eucharistic vitality*. In the last analysis, it is a rallying call: “Truly live your Eucharistic life.” The fact that our practice differs considerably from Father d’Alzon’s is not the object of our inquiry. We shall be concerned here more with the impact of a personal experience and a man’s approach to a love.

For Father d’Alzon the Eucharistic life was one of the facets of his love for Christ. As was his custom, he summed up his thinking in a key formula: “The whole Jesus Christ is in the

Eucharist. The Eucharist is the supreme devotion because it means going to the whole Jesus Christ.” In the Eucharist we find *the whole Jesus Christ*.

The secret of d’Alzon’s Eucharistic life consisted in seeking from it what nourished love: “*There we find Jesus Christ, our love, giving Himself to us and teaching us to give ourselves to Him and to the service of His Church.*”

1

This famous text should be written in letters of gold. It would be difficult to express more cogently the soul of all Eucharistic activity. It is an encounter of love, a school of love, but the rejection of a simple tête-à-tête. To love Christ is always to prepare to serve His Church.

The essential equation remains: the Eucharist equals love. “What a mysterious union between a man and Jesus in the Eucharist, what a life it is if we can only understand it!... If I love Our Lord, I must seek Him in the sacrament of His love.”²

The man who tells us these things is not theorizing. He is disclosing something about his own very personal experience of the Eucharist as an experience of love.

A Passion for the Eucharistic Jesus

“Around nine o’clock I had gone to reflect in the park. I saw some light; it was coming from the chapel window. I looked at it for quite a while. My God, you are waiting for me. I love you. But I love you as if I didn’t love you. This lamp makes me remember that you are my guest, and I won’t think any more about it in a moment. Why do you come? Why do you find your delights among the children of men? Is it I who contribute to your delights?”³

Emmanuel d’Alzon was twenty-one years old. Writing from Lavagnac, his family’s beautiful château, he confided these thoughts to his friend Luglien. Since childhood the tabernacle had drawn him like a magnet. When he was a very small boy he was caught by surprise in front of the chapel door, looking through the keyhole.

- “What are you doing Emmanuel?”

- "I am adoring."

The life of his family immersed him in the pious devotion of the times, centered on the Eucharist: "attending" Mass, receiving Communion, visiting the Blessed Sacrament, celebrating the Feast of Corpus Christi. His ordination to the priesthood intensified this piety with its gentle, affective tonality. Yet when dark clouds hung over him after a series of trials, his Eucharistic life, instead of being weakened, assumed its full power with an emphasis on the aspect of sacrifice. By uniting himself to Christ's sufferings he was better able to bear his own and to become "wheat ground to become host."

The way he celebrated Mass impressed his intimate friends: noble gestures, a clear but rapid diction. On the other hand, he devoted considerable time to his preparation before Mass and to his thanksgiving afterwards. The principal focus of interest for him was the tabernacle: for him the Eucharist was the *Real Presence*, a more or less instinctive reaction against the Protestant negations, but above all, a keen awareness of what he received during his hours of adoration in the chapel. To this we should add his apostolate to the cloistered nuns dedicated to adoration.

As Vicar General of Nîmes, he directed everyone toward the tabernacle: "I want to group all the religious works of Nîmes around perpetual adoration." His great joys included: founding the priory of the Ladies of the Assumption, dedicated to adoration, forming a lay group of women adorers, being told there would be one more tabernacle. "Imagine our joy the day we have a small chapel and Mass and the Blessed Sacrament under our own roof!"⁴ Under our own roof! He used to say: "At Assumption the Blessed Sacrament is the master of the house." He bought beautiful sacred objects, chalices and vestments: "I like whatever gives solemnity and majesty to worship, but the trinkets we find so often in use displease me beyond words."

5

He was an advocate of frequent communion, before his time. Even if, in accordance with the custom of the day, he tended somewhat to separate Communion from Mass, we can admire his passion in inspiring hunger for the Eucharist wherever he went. His close friend, Father Galeran, remembered the day when during a Mass at the College, Father held up the host before Communion and spoke deeply stirring words to the students:

"The Word Incarnate, the priest and you, in a few moments we shall all be one. The life of

Christ, the Son of God will be our life, His breathing will be ours; His heartbeats will govern ours. Come, unite yourselves to your God, and during your thanksgiving repeat the prayer of the Church: "Lord Jesus, never permit me ever to be separated from you."⁶

The various nuances of the encounter.

In response to one of his directees who complained she was going around in circles and making no progress he wrote: "Here is a door to lead you out of the vicious circle, the voice of Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. Spend as much time there as you can. Nourish your heart with thoughts of sacrifice. What I am telling you comes from my own experience."⁷

He pondered his experience at length, setting aside theoretical problems relating to *transubstantiation*. It

was not that he wanted to spare himself intellectual effort but because his intellect did not work along those lines. His doctrine was born of practice and gave rise to practice, and can be summed up in three points:

1. The Eucharist, being the proof of love, is a lesson of love and the food of love.
2. The Eucharist is always an encounter with the mystery of the Cross.
3. Eucharistic encounters can deploy all the nuances of Jesus: the Jesus of the Trinity, of the Gospel, and of the Church.

These various approaches obviously demand a powerfully awakened faith. The Christian sacramental mystery is absolutely unique when we look at other religions. We need to place great emphasis on the exclamation that follows the Consecration: "Let us proclaim the mystery of faith." When we do not maintain our Eucharistic life through a lively faith, it comes to nothing. There is a preliminary examen Father d'Alzon constantly invites us to make: *Do I believe in the Eucharist?*

He believes and he is filled with wonder. So God can really produce this miracle? He can create a strange reality that is neither ordinary reality nor purely a symbol, but the arising of a different reality: in the sign *the whole Jesus Christ* is present, Calvary comes to us, the unity of the Church is realized, brothers and sisters come together. All this happens by words spoken over some bread and wine!

When Father d'Alzon was 68, he was still astounded: "Is not the miracle of transubstantiation the greatest of all miracles? To create is a divine prerogative, but to take a small quantity of matter and make of it the body and blood of a God, what greater power can you ask for? In order to annihilate oneself to that extent one needs the power of God."⁸

He always insisted on these two ideas: a miracle, and a miracle of love. This sacrament makes us see how immensely we are loved: Jesus Christ gives Himself to us in it in such an extraordinary way. The foundation of all Eucharistic practice consists in asking oneself how to respond to love with love.

Father d'Alzon's faith sees in the host "the memorial of the wonderful deeds of God," which are all mysteries of love. Sacramental creation is the remembrance of His creative power; the ultimate incarnation of Jesus Christ in the sacred host and in us, the mystery of our Redemption reactivated at each Mass, and the mystery of our resurrection through Communion with the Risen Lord.⁹ Speaking to his group of women committed to adoration, he said, "You need to find in your hearts exquisite inventions to respond fully to the love of the God of the Eucharist."

10

The Eucharist as Love, that is his first theme. The second is that the Sacred Host brings with it the Cross. To illustrate this thought he evokes a picture that has several stages. First we are on Calvary with Mary, John, and the holy women. Keeping this vision of Jesus before us, we go in thought to a church where the Mass is sacramentally reproducing the same scene. We then imagine all the Masses in the world at every second, and all the adorations of the Blessed Sacrament: *the Eucharistic Jesus is present everywhere in His sacrifice*. Through the activity of the Eucharist the whole world is in the throes of redemption. It is not merely a question of remembrance and even less of imagination. The Cross really comes to us; every Eucharistic action is intrinsically sacrificial.

It is up to us to live our Eucharistic life in this way: we contemplate Jesus on the Cross, we receive from his the riches of the Redemption, and we are asked to make a sacrifice of our life

as well. A Eucharistic encounter should normally culminate in a renewed and specific gift of self.

The third theme: the nuances of these Eucharistic encounters. Here Father d'Alzon develops his doctrine of *the whole Christ*. Since the Eucharist gives us *the whole Jesus Christ*, our encounter with the Sacred Host is Trinitarian, evangelical, and ecclesial.

The Trinitarian encounter

The Trinitarian encounter is the fire of the *Sanctus*, the most astounding and adoring of encounters: "Jesus is my God. He is the eternal Word who assumed the form of a slave, who abased Himself amid the humiliations of Calvary and the helplessness of the tabernacle, yet He remaining as always the splendor of the Father and God worthy of adoration. Within the Eucharistic species my faith discovers the Being of God, an ocean of power, light, and love."

11

I cannot resist the urge to cite (in summary form) the development of this theme in his very long meditation on the Eucharist and the Trinity.¹²

"In the Eucharistic Jesus, I encounter the Father: God as an ocean of power. I adore this power which manifested itself originally through Creation. But from the depths of the heavens these words ring out:

make all things new

(Rev 21:5). In the fullness of my faith, of my acknowledgment of God's supreme dominion over all creation, I adore this creative power and ask for a new creation:

Send forth your Spirit and

they shall be created; you will renew the face of the earth"

(Ps 104:30). What would happen if, when I invoked the loving omnipotence of God that the Eucharist reveals to me, I said to him: create a pure heart in me! You have given me your Son; therefore, you love me. This love gives me the right to demand of you that you work a miracle of transformation in me.

“In the Eucharistic Jesus, I encounter the Word: God as an ocean of wisdom. Teach me, O Wisdom, in what supernatural way I must accept my life in order to transform painful things into precious stones. How can I rightly judge this antipathy, this revolt, this irritation? Make me see things as you see them. If I see and judge things in your spirit, I shall look at them with calm, pure, guileless eyes; events will appear in their true light.

“In the Eucharistic Jesus, I encounter the Spirit: God as an ocean of Love. I have loved you with an eternal love (Jer 31:3). Let us love God since He first loved us (1 Jn 4:19). Let us love first of all by saying thank you for life, for faith, for our vocation. In these thank you’s, the minutes of adoration pass very quickly. Adoration becomes an act of love. The Spirit clothes us with His power to love. Th

e love of God has

been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit

*(Rm 5:5). The goal of adoration should be to awaken our love for God. In the world, there is a great lethargy with respect to love of God. If we filled ourselves with love during adoration we could pour forth love. When we come from adoration others should feel the power of our love for Jesus Christ. In this immense love, many paltry bonds are broken, so many pretensions vanish, so many miseries disappear. Through a life springing from adoration we shall transform the world filled with hatred and egoism, we shall set it ablaze with the fire of love (Lk 12:49). If we ourselves are
*fire!”**

Encounter with the Gospel

Everything we know about Jesus through the Gospel nourishes our Eucharistic encounters. The liturgical year and its feasts gave Father d’Alzon the opportunity to relive episodes in the life of Jesus and to vivify his union with Him by overcoming monotony. It is not always easy to love the Eucharistic Jesus. We need to hear a voice, to see a face. Father d’Alzon sought them in the Gospel with a realism that may well surprise us.

For example, the Eucharist at Christmastime: “Mary carried Jesus within her, how should I carry Him when He is within me through the Eucharist? With what spirit of faith and love should I develop Jesus within me and make Him grow? There was an exchange of life between Mary and the Child. What exchange is there in me? *I live, no, it is Christ who lives in me. Who will help me to understand this substitution by which God takes my life and gives me His?”*

Thus, the encounter takes on various nuances. Today I have a rendezvous with the Jesus who reveals God to me in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. On another occasion, it will be the Jesus of Holy Thursday or Easter, and a particular Mass or adoration will give me light to see how inadequately I have been living with Jesus. He is there, alive. The Gospel alone does not always provide this sense of proximity to a living person. But the sacred host without the Gospel can also leave us paradoxically far from the sense of living with Jesus and like him. Referring as always to experience, Father d'Alzon shows the need of keeping our faith and our love perpetually awake through a Eucharistic practice nurtured by the Gospel.

The Ecclesial Encounter

The Eucharistic Jesus is the Church in the process of being built. The ecclesial Jesus unites the members of His body by feeding them the same bread: receive my body to become my body.

“Jesus becomes mystically incarnate in mankind. Whence the two effects of Communion, the first being individual: *Christ lives in me*; the second being collective: *Because the loaf of bread is one, we, many though we are, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf* (1 Cor 10:17).”

14

It should be noted however that Father d'Alzon insists more on the tête-à-tête with Christ than on an encounter between brothers and sisters in Christ.

For us today, the contrary is true. Fraternal fellowship is given such a special place that we might be inclined in our celebrations to forget that what unites us is first of all the bread, first of all Christ. Father d'Alzon reminds us that in the hunger for the Eucharist, hunger for God comes first. Hunger for God, at the proper depth, must awaken hunger for brotherhood.

We can also interpret his great intuition: *the whole Jesus Christ* in the same sense. Then the tête-à-tête with Jesus immediately raises a question: which Jesus? For Father d'Alzon the Christ we encounter in the Eucharist is always the ecclesial Christ, who cannot be separated from humanity. Our encounter with the ecclesial Christ should awaken us to an encounter with

our brothers. But let us make ourselves clear. The claim that the Eucharist gathers brothers and sisters together is coming increasingly under attack on the level of what is, alas, concrete reality. The Eucharist gathers together Christians who

would like

to be brothers and sisters. The difference in emphasis is significant. When Father d'Alzon tells us to go to Mass as we would go to Calvary he reminds us that the Mass is not simply a matter of guitars and beautiful sentiments, but indeed a mystery of blood, of death for death. It must involve death to egoism and death to hatred, for nothing else can make us brothers and sisters.

By His death Christ gathered together

the dispersed children of God.

By our own sacrifices we set aside hostility and indifference. We do much more than merely stand shoulder to shoulder.

The Eucharist is not a “Thing”

I have stressed the variety of Eucharistic Encounters because Father d'Alzon invites us to something more than acceptance of a doctrine and even of a devotion. He is urging us to enter into a life-giving relationship. We do not go to *the Eucharist*, we go to Jesus. We must beware of a vocabulary that would turn the Eucharist into a “thing.”

At the Last Supper and on the Cross Jesus became: *the Mass*. When Jesus communicated His life to us He became:

on.

Communi

Jesus

present in the sacred host became:

the

Real Presence

or

the Blessed Sacrament. A

Eucharistic life demands a preliminary effort on our part not to approach the Eucharist as if it were a “thing,” but indeed to approach the Eucharist as “Someone.”

The second effort demanded of us is to remain there with Someone, to shake ourselves so we will be wide awake, in an experience of authentic adoration, conversion, fraternal communion, and missionary zeal. Jesus can transform us only if we are really there. The Eucharist is not some kind of magic. Father d'Alzon has harsh things to say about the absence of vital awareness on our part:

“The external bearing is good, but what is going on inside? You adore the Blessed Sacrament: what are you thinking about? You are at Mass: where is your mind? And even at Communion, how your imagination is straying! You are in the most intimate of relationships with God, what actions are required?”

On another occasion, he asks: “What is an Oblate Sister for whom Jesus Christ is not her life? What is an Oblate Sister who receives Communion several times a week and is not united as one with her Spouse? What is an Oblate Sister who goes to Mass every day and thinks of anything else than of being completely immolated?” And this sharp comment: “When I speak of frequent Communion I am not speaking of routine Communion.”¹⁵

The basic key to Eucharistic activity: “The more we are united to Jesus Christ in this sacrament, the more we must unite ourselves to His sacrifice... His continually renewed sacrifice must be the model of my own. If I am not self-sacrificing, if I am calculating, if I do not seek out what is most arduous, I am not worthy of him.” And as always after his considerations, comes the blunt question: “Wherein do I have the spirit of sacrifice?”¹⁶

This activity extends from the most generous celebration to very modest tasks. “You prepare the bread of the strong every morning, let it be seen that you yourself have been well fed with it.”¹⁷ It should not surprise us that he sees this as a theological activity. Seeing how God thus humbles himself, Faith must be fully awake in order to have a genuine encounter with God through the sacred host. Hope is reassured, happy. How can we fail to depend on the One who loves us that much? And Love calls out to love: How can we not love God who conceived the idea of making Himself bread in order to be united to us? ¹⁸

Living the Mass

For Father d’Alzon the Mass is essentially the sacrifice of Christ and a school of sacrifice. “When you go to Mass, go up to Calvary.” The sacrament triumphs over time and space, Calvary comes to us. “The Mass places us close to Mary, gives us Mary’s sentiments, by giving Jesus Christ back to us at the greatest moment in the history of the world, in His most intense activity of redemptive love.”

“This face-to-face encounter with Jesus on the Cross commands two actions on our part. First,

we are to offer the sacrifice of Christ together with him, thus effecting a labor of redemption: “Every time this sacrifice is celebrated, the work of our redemption is accomplished.” [*](#)

Secondly, we must progress from Mass to Mass in the spirit of sacrifice. “When will the Divine Victim teach us the great law of sacrifice?”¹⁹

Father d’Alzon sums up this entire practice of the Mass in one of his most fiery sayings: “The Mass is the unbloody reproduction of the bloody sacrifice of Christ: this is the moment for me to immolate myself.” And he comments: “If every day when I go to Mass or celebrate Mass I went up to Calvary in thought, if I entered into my Divine Master’s oblation, if I proclaimed my love to Him again, if I accepted what it will please Him to send me, and if I came away like Mary descending from Calvary, what would my life be like for the rest of the day?” Then the inevitable blunt question: “How have I participated in the Mass until now?”²⁰

Like Catholics throughout the centuries, he asks with astonishment: Why do so many Masses have no effect? “It is useless for me to feel affection if I am not ready to sacrifice everything. After so many Masses, wherein do I have the spirit of sacrifice?”²¹

Receiving Communion

One wonders how the practice developed of separating Communion from Mass by encouraging the habit of receiving Holy Communion before, after, and apart from the Mass. Often it was a matter of time. For example, it was feared that men less drawn to religious practice might find the Mass too long with the many Communions. And again with an eye on the clock and a certain lack of understanding of the meaning of the Mass, even fervent Catholics came to think: *Provided I receive Communion, it’s O.K.*

A contrary attitude can destroy the unity of the Mass: not Communion without Mass, but Mass without Communion. “There are those who believe they should excuse themselves from Communion because of their weakness, but they are very culpable because, knowing their helplessness, they refuse to reach out to the strength that is Jesus Christ. Why should anyone be held back by ridiculous scruples and ask whether he or she is ready to receive Communion?” ²² There was hesitation in Father d’Alzon’s day, but one also had to await permission from one’s confessor or from some “authority” to receive Communion more than

once a week. We have to take these facts into account in order to evaluate this somewhat autonomous spirituality of Communion which is so evident in Father d'Alzon's writings. We should at least heed his call for fully alive Communions.

As he saw it, "going to" Communion was obviously to receive, but to receive as actively as possible, that is to say, by being imbued with the spirit of Christ, by entering into His sentiments. "I receive Communion and I am not another Jesus Christ! What kind of preparation do I make? And when He is within me, what goes on? Who, on the outside would suspect, by the way my life has been transformed, that God has visited me?"²³

Communion communicates the life of Jesus Christ to us so that our life may change: "If we want to fight against temptations and sluggishness, we must order our life through prayer at the foot of the crucifix and through thanksgiving after Communion." Thanksgiving is an intense, unifying activity. "Lord, may I some day be consummated in your unity, and may this union begin even here on earth and become more complete each day; may I be more united to your sentiments and thoughts in my sentiments and thoughts."²⁴

If we evade the demands of Communion, we are nothing but caricatures: *that fellow receives Communion and he is mean as hell!*

"A good thanksgiving does not consist in reciting certain acts or rattling off the virtues one by one. It is not a matter of being recollected for a few moments after which you go about your business as if we had not received Communion. Your tongue that has just received the Author of all holiness starts again to tear down your neighbor, you make no effort, you fall back into the same faults. It is better not to recite so many thanksgiving formulas and instead keep remembering throughout the day that you have received the God of all holiness."

²⁵

Communion has been made easier. We have made of it the fourth act in a single sequence that passes quite naturally from repentance, hearing the Word, and the Consecration, to Communion. That is good, but it also involves the great risk of making the act of receiving Communion commonplace.

Adore the Host?

When Emmanuel d'Alzon was thirty-five he wrote a meticulous and impressive "Rule of Life" in which we read: "I have noticed the palpable influence Our Lord has on me in the Eucharist by the difference in my dispositions when I pray in the chapel or elsewhere."²⁶

For him a visit to the Blessed Sacrament was an opportunity to listen through infusion: "Silence? Yes, but the eloquent silence of the mysteries." A silence that pacifies and becomes dazzling light: "What great lessons we could receive from Jesus if we went to Him in the tabernacle to be our teacher of prayer." He invited all superiors to meditate before the Blessed Sacrament on reprimands to be made and action to be taken. He affirmed that there we become "supernatural in our relationships" and there we are able to prepare better sermons.

When he described the sentiments a religious should have in the chapel, he was describing himself. Astonishment: Lord, so you really want to be in our midst? Sadness: and we don't go to see you or do so absent-mindedly. A very strong sense of the divine presence: Lord, you are in our house, under our roof, I can come to see you whenever I want.²⁷

In another meditation for contemplatives, we read: "Is there anything more immobile than a nun in adoration, and yet is there anything more powerful? You who spend hours before the tabernacle remember that is where saints are made."²⁸

When we read these thoughts we cannot but sense a disharmony between this worship before the tabernacle and our own practice. Is the Eucharist a mystery of adoration or of nourishment?

I borrow my answer from Karl Rahner²⁹: there can be no doubt that Christ makes Himself present in the sacred host in order to be our food:

Take

and eat.

And this legitimizes reserving the Blessed Sacrament in the tabernacle in order to bring Communion to the sick.

But it is not ordinary food! Jesus clearly shows this in St. John's Gospel (6:56-57) when He goes from flesh and blood (*The man who feeds on My flesh and drinks My blood*) to the "me" of a person:

the

man who feeds on Me will have life because of Me.

Christ gives us as our food His very Person, His whole Being. To say

Christ is food

does not signify that His presence is limited to the specific fact of consuming Him as food. The opposite is true. We consume Him as food because He is truly, totally there. And since He is present we are to treat Him as our Lord as long as the particles of the sacred host remain intact. This is the origin of Eucharistic adoration.

At the same time our adoration must never lose its relationship to the twofold reality of the Eucharist: the reality of sacrifice and the reality of food. In order not to forget this, it might be better to speak of the *Eucharistic Presence* instead of the *Real Presence*. This does not call into question the reality of the presence but stresses its very particular character as a sacrament. It is the risen Crucified One who gives Himself to us as the bread of life. Every adoration, every visit to the Blessed Sacrament continues or prepares for a Mass.

A visit to the Blessed Sacrament is therefore an encounter with the crucified and risen Lord who wants to unite us to Himself through the *Take and eat*. To forget that is to reduce this visit to the seeking of a presence and a union which, though obviously praiseworthy, could make us lose the richness of a truly Eucharistic encounter.

We should question acts of adoration that do not develop our Eucharistic hunger characterized so well by Father d'Alzon as involving: adoration, the spirit of sacrifice, an effort at identification with Christ and therefore the determination to change certain things about our life, and finally the sense of the Church.

But how can we fail to question the crude, ignorant, or negligent ways of eliminating the tabernacle altogether and of condemning adoration?

The Eucharist and Life

As we come to the end of this chapter, a fundamental question arises. We have seen the importance of the Eucharist for Father d'Alzon, but somewhat as a world apart. What link did he establish between the Eucharist and life, life in its very concrete reality?

This is a question our generation asks, but it was altogether foreign to Father d'Alzon. He could not have imagined the division that has developed between daily life and faith. His whole life was Eucharistic, and this influenced all he did. He lived his Eucharistic life as intensely as his daily life. The power of experience established a bond between them without his even having to think about it. How could a man possessed by Christ and who had a powerful encounter with Christ at Mass, through Communion, and through adoration before the tabernacle, not live his whole life in union with Christ?

The bothersome and abstract question of our own time is: "How to live our faith in our daily life?" It is perhaps only an effort to elude Father d'Alzon's very concrete question: "Are you possessed by Christ?" Eucharistic practice is an experience of Christ, *an experience*. At a certain depth and intensity, all human experiences come together, causing the alibi-questions about "the Eucharist and life" to vanish.

In very truth, what is our experience of life? Zen says that in order to know what an apple tastes like we must bite into it. Father d'Alzon truly lived the Eucharist and he knew its taste.

CHAPTER XII

THOUSANDS OF CHRISTS

It is in you that Jesus must be born.

If Christ is born a thousand times

in Bethlehem and not in you,

you remain lost forever. Silesius

“Lord Jesus, come and live in me, become incarnate in me.”¹ This is one of Father d’Alzon’s favorite themes: “The threefold incarnation of Jesus Christ who is born in the manger, on the altar, and in our souls is a mystery that should completely absorb us.”

“O mystery! Can the union of the creature with God incarnate go beyond that? But many obligations are imposed on the soul that enters into this invention of divine love by the light of faith. That is indeed the union Jesus asked of His Father on the eve of His death for His chosen ones: *I living in them, You living in Me* (Jn 17:23).”

Do we share these familiar perspectives on union with Jesus Christ through our thoughts and through our desire to imitate him? “Take Jesus as your model.” This advice recurred constantly in Father d’Alzon’s preaching. However, the imitation of Christ took on a very special meaning for him for which we must use a technical term: *mystical incarnation*.

When I imitate in the ordinary sense of the word I remain *myself* facing the model I am imitating with my own energies. In the imitation of Jesus as Father d’Alzon conceived it, I do not strive to copy the Jesus of the past from the outside. Instead, it is Jesus living today, the risen Jesus who comes within me to live my life in such a way that my life is also His life, an extension of His life, *an additional human nature*. In becoming interiorized to that degree, our effort to imitate becomes an incarnation. As soon as Father d’Alzon began to meditate on Luke 1:26-38, the Annunciation, he could not resist: from the

Incarnation of the Word within Mary's womb he passed to the incarnation of Christ within each of the faithful. "Jesus was formed in Mary's womb, He wants to be formed in my soul: therein lies the whole perfection of the interior life. Jesus Christ wants to be brought forth by me, that is to say, manifested, preached, proclaimed by all my actions and words. That is the apostle's perfection. That is what is offered to me if I want to share divine life by participating, as far as is in my power, in the renewal of the mystery of the Incarnation in the very depths of my soul. That is what I must work at: to form Jesus Christ within me, to form Jesus Christ in the Church."

2

Discovering Bérulle

D'Alzon discovered this doctrine "on every page of St. Paul," *³ but it was not until he discovered the thought of Bérulle, under the influence of Mother Marie Eugénie, that he saw its full importance. It was a doctrine in accord with the French School of the 17th century. As for Father d'Alzon, after a few initial, docile efforts, he gave up: "Your Bérulle is too complicated." Nevertheless, this introduction lasted three years, and Mother Marie Eugénie's contribution was so significant that we need to quote her in order to get an idea of this spirituality which Father d'Alzon was going to transpose... into a clearer more vigorous style!

"Since all Christians are called to form the mystical body of Jesus Christ, I think it is no exaggeration to offer oneself to Him *to be in a sense a human nature for Him*, by striving to *let Jesus act within us in all things*.

Long ago God had given me this strong attraction. Since then there has remained in me only the knowledge of the perfection, the justice of this self-effacing obedience, and the honor it alone can render to God. For it renews, so to speak, before God's eyes in all things and at every minute the plenitude of honor that Jesus Christ rendered to His Father

in Himself

and that He desires to render to Him

in us,

by becoming through grace the person as it were or, to use the language of the Gospels, *the life of our life*.

"I likewise see that this is the true thirst of Jesus Christ who would have wanted to continue eternally the homage rendered to the Father by each of His states, * remaining in them in weakness or suffering, at the same time manifesting His love for men and never ceasing to pour out on them the effects of each of His mysteries.

“According to my comprehension, it is true that He *eternized* them by bringing before His Father the plenitude of the same states that had entered into the glory of the Godhead and of eternity and had become sources of eternal graces for men.

“But—I speak as a woman—Jesus Christ misses suffering and abasement and, in order that they may be presented with these marks before God and men, *they must come and clothe poor human creatures who thereby become one with the sacred body of Jesus Christ.*

“It seems to me that in honor of the fact that the Humanity of Jesus Christ possesses no “*I*,” but relates totally to the Divine Person of the Word, God wants me to pay attention only to my life as a Christian woman in which, through grace, Jesus Christ, God and Man, is given to me as my prime mover, my complement, my prayer, action, words, and virtue, my everything.”

4

The central theme is that Christ wants to live in me the way the Word lives in Jesus, and thus literally be *the life of my life*. This poses the same problem, making all due allowances, as for the Incarnation. In Christ there is not a fusion of the Word and Jesus, but a very mysterious interpenetration which is a total intercommunication between the two natures. By analogy, there is no fusion of Jesus’ life with ours. Far from annihilating our personality, the mystical incarnation gives it its greatest possible value; we remain *who and what we are*, but at a superior level, we are Christified.

As always, Father d’Alzon was more concerned with living than explaining: “Constantly reread Chapter XV of St. John (*I am the Vine*), see in it the union we must have with Jesus Christ in order to be united to God. He is the vine, we are the branches, there can be no union with divine life without union with Jesus Christ, that is to say, with His doctrine, His commandments, His intentions, His examples. Whence the necessity of doing everything for Jesus Christ, through Jesus Christ, with Jesus Christ.”

5

The Mystical Incarnation

Father d’Alzon is willing to go along with Bérulle, to “Bérullize,” if you will, provided he quickly launches into concrete action: “Doing something with Jesus Christ.” However, he will *begin* by

stressing union with Christ. The time for action must certainly come, but it will come too early or too independently if, in acting like Christ, we have not first become other Christs.

We need to grasp the extraordinary inwardness of this union: we abandon ourselves to Christ, surrendering the gates of the city to Him, allowing Him to enter, offering our whole life *to Him who is within us*.

During a retreat Father d'Alzon once commented: 'What Our Lord seems to want above all of me is an absolute readiness to be continually dependent on Him and on His action within me. I must be the instrument of Jesus Christ, I must have Him be my master in all things and for all things, and I must aim never to stray from this thought. It seems to me that Our Lord is asking me to go to Him through a simple sentiment of love that will guide me, provided I abandon myself to it completely. I must strive to abandon myself to Him in my every action.'

6

We have seen that he continues to maintain a distance, at least in his formulation, between the effort of going to Christ and the sentiment that Christ dwells in us. The next step is to proceed to the idea of a mystical incarnation which he studies under all its aspects in a meditation entitled "Jesus Christ becoming incarnate in the religious soul," which is a long commentary on Ephesians 3:17; "*May Christ dwell in your hearts through faith* ."7

The essentials of his thinking find expression in the very first lines: "Jesus Christ was not content to become incarnate once within Mary's womb, He wants to become incarnate every day within us, and that is what Saint Paul is saying on every page of his Epistles."

This idea of a mystical incarnation (mystical in this context is not the opposite of *real* but of *physical*)

is the goal of all his desires to be another Christ and brings them all together: imitation, union, abandonment, indwelling. "Mary said:

Be it

done to me according to thy word.

That is the most complete surrender of a creature to the wishes of the Creator. The words

The Holy Spirit will come upon you

are also addressed to us. Do we want the Holy Spirit to come and form Jesus Christ within us?

Do we want to take on the sentiments and thoughts of Jesus and be completely subject to him?

Do we want to carry Jesus Christ within us? Then He must first be formed within us. Who can

surmise the perfection I can attain if I allow Jesus Christ the freedom to bring forth a new

creation in me, giving Him full power over my being so He can transfigure me completely into

Himself? Once Jesus Christ is formed within me,

*I
shall be another Jesus Christ”*

The Life I Live Now Is Not My Own

How can all that come to pass? Father d’Alzon meditates on the twofold work of mystical incarnation: to be dispossessed of self and to put on Christ. “That is the work to be done, I must cast off the old man, Adam and his lusts; and put on Jesus Christ, the new man, and His grace. But Jesus Christ does not want to be an external garment; He wants to penetrate the very depths of my soul. How? Through faith: *May the Father make Christ dwell in your hearts through faith* (Ep 3:17). What is this indwelling of Jesus Christ within me if not a kind of incarnation?”

This Incarnation is a dynamism: There is much I can do so that Christ may become my life. “My life will have to be transformed so I can say with St. Paul: *The life I live now is not my own; Christ is living in me* (Gal 2:20). Perfection consists in dissolving my life, or rather melding it, losing it in the life of Jesus Christ.”

His hesitation translates his difficulty in describing such a unique reality. Exactly what do the oft-cited words of St. Paul mean: *The life I live now is not my own; Christ is living in me?* Father d’Alzon answers in a unilateral way, as though wanting to lay great emphasis on one particular aspect of the matter. He considers the mystical incarnation not in the light of fulfilling what is best in us (very important) but in the light of renouncing the evil within us, so that “the life of Jesus may be our life.”

“What a sacrifice of my whole self is needed if I want to establish within me the unalloyed life of Jesus Christ, if I want to realize this incarnation by which Jesus Christ will be the soul of my soul, the heart of my heart, the life of my life! Who will fathom the words: *The life I live now is not my own?* Who will teach me the dispossession by which I am no longer to live by my own life, but must take on the sentiments of Jesus Christ in all things, and live a life in which these sentiments are to be the prime movers of my actions: *Take on the sentiments of Christ’s own heart* (Ph 2:5).”

What Is The Nature Of This Death

If we want to nurture the sentiments of Christ within us we must mercilessly put to death our own evil and lukewarm sentiments. Father d'Alzon closes the *Directory* with an unsparing chapter on this dispossession of self which he entitles

Concerning the Interior Life,

but which should be called

Concerning Interior Death.

As is his custom, he begins by expressing his entire thought in a powerful sentence: "The life of Our Lord within us can be established only if we die to ourselves." Actually, he says "die completely" and goes on to strike powerful blows with the weapons of "renunciation, agony, absolute stripping of self, death to this, death to that..."

In any event, we are still looking at things with the same perspective: death to the evil *me* in order to make possible the birth of a Christic *me*. The life of Christ does not come to kill our life; it vivifies it to the maximum because it is the true life. To say

the life I live is no longer my own

means that within me an "I" has been put to death, removed, not in order to give way to a life that would no longer be mine but so that my life may henceforth be

the life of Christ lived by me.

My new life will include everything this incarnation involves in the way of imperfections, necessary and arduous progress, and the continual killing of the old "me" that is always springing up again.

I believe there was need to clarify the meaning of this death. For some of Father d'Alzon's formulas could make us think that through death and fusion we lose our life, in the life of Christ. True, we lose a certain way of life, we kill certain thoughts, sentiments, and ways of acting, but only in order to allow the life of Christ to awaken, inspire and enrich all that is best in us.

The Word does not kill the man in Jesus. The more divine life permeates Jesus, the more He is Jesus of Nazareth. But His humanity is a divine marvel. In the same way (analogically speaking!) our perfection must be a Christic perfection: our own perfection at its highest level.

I use the word “Christic” because the term “Christian” has lost some of its pungency. The idea of a mystical incarnation fully restores the power of the mystery that links us to Christ when He makes us “Christians,” far more than external copies of Christ. We need to give the very life of Christ an opportunity to develop within us, not in order to make a xerox copy of some aspect of the Christ of yesterday but to enable Christ to live today an additional experience, something really new: in short, to give Him *an additional human nature*.

It suffices to look at Father d’Alzon to see what happens when the very life of Christ invades a man who *dies* sufficiently to allow the life of Christ to have full sway: “What a transformation it would be if we constantly felt Jesus Christ present within us! If we were very eager for this fusion of the life of Jesus Christ within our own. But can we engage in these thoughts without being profoundly humiliated by the pettiness of our interior movements which are powered everywhere by miserable causes. I ask God to permeate me with the greatness of every action taken under the seal of Jesus Christ who dwells within me and who is to my soul what my soul is to my body.”⁸

Forming Jesus Christ in Others

We can understand why St. Paul’s searching question in 2 Cor 13:5 made a deep impression on him: *Test yourselves to see whether you are living in faith; examine yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you?* “What a question! Indeed, Jesus Christ is in me, and I must belong to Him alone. What a *union* and what a *transformation*.”⁹

These are the two essential words of the doctrine of the mystical incarnation: so complete a *union* with Jesus Christ that it *transforms* our life into a “Christian” life in the strongest sense of the term. Even when it is expressed in awkward ways, this is the simplest and most fundamental reality of “Christian” faith. The mystical incarnation is not some sort of an instantaneous and magical phenomenon. It is by believing in the Gospel and by living it day after day that Christ becomes incarnate within us.

We are other Christs in the very measure that we are Gospels when we evangelize ourselves and when we evangelize others so that other Christs may be born.

This whole book on Father d'Alzon's spirituality has gradually become a commentary on Philippians 1:21: *For, to me, "life" means Christ.* These words could be understood in a rather weak sense: "I think a great deal about Christ." The generally accepted meaning is much stronger: "I live with Christ and I am striving to imitate him."

We have just seen that Father d'Alzon has reached the utmost limits of the perspective Saint Paul opens up for us in this text as well as in many others: giving to the words *to me, "life" means Christ* the meaning of a mystical incarnation which makes of all believers, according to Silesius' beautiful poem, thousands of Christs:

It is in you that Jesus must be born.

If Christ is born a thousand times in Bethlehem

and not in you,

you remain lost forever.

CHAPTER XIII

THY KINGDOM COME

"I cannot love Jesus Christ

without wanting everybody

to love him."

"I cannot love Jesus Christ without wanting everybody to love him, and that is the apostolic hallmark of my life."¹

This is the last sentence in the *Directory*, which begins with the words: "Christ is my life." There is a beautiful unity here, the very unity of Father d'Alzon's life and writings. Possessed by Christ, he wanted to shout everywhere that Christ is Life.

A man of syntheses, he was a total stranger to any kind of division between action and contemplation. As he saw it, the interior life must launch us into the apostolate; otherwise we need to ask ourselves questions about this *interior life*. He saw his religious as men who, coming from prayer and study, rush out in all directions.

He searched for a motto that could nurture this profound unity of Assumptionist life. He chose: *Thy Kingdom come.*

“Our spiritual life, our religious substance, our reason for being as Augustinians of the Assumption is to be found in our motto

Adveniat Regnum Tuum:

the coming of the Reign of God in our souls, the coming of the Reign of God in the world.”

2

He saw this motto “ART” as a dynamism in the process of expansion: the Reign of God takes possession of an apostle’s heart; the apostle propagates the Reign in the hearts of others; through all these consecrated hearts the Kingdom of God impregnates the atmosphere, institutions, and customs.

In the preceding pages we have considered at length one man’s face-to-face encounter with God. Far from being a life closed in on itself, it is the fiery core where love prepares for action on the public squares and at the crossroads of the world.

The Kingdom Within Us

“Every soul is a kingdom. A man is a world and Jesus Christ must reign over it.”³ The mystical incarnation is purely and simply this reign of Christ within each of us. However, the idea of the Kingdom enabled Father d’Alzon to insist on the dynamic and positive aspects of the incarnation. It was no longer only a question of dying, but an invitation to life: “The Kingdom within us is the state of our relationship with God.”

*
—

He saw this relationship first of all as an incessant threefold movement: “We strip ourselves of our faults, we give Him absolute dominion over us, and we can then receive His communications.”

Another approach: “The ART within us is the most absolute dependence of our whole being upon God’s actions.” If such dependence makes us bristle, Father d’Alzon turns our attention to the mystery of our freedom. We live our freedom within God’s good pleasure, with which coincide everything we can want and everything we can do that is most fundamentally good for

us. "God makes us freer in the measure that we let Him reign more perfectly over us. The perfection of our obedience is the root of our perfect freedom. God does not reign over slaves." This suffices to exorcise an Alzonian vocabulary (God's rights, God's supreme dominion, our dependence on God) which could becloud reality: Since God is Love, His Reign can only be a relationship of love. His *dominion* is the dominion of love. To say *Thy Kingdom come within me* is simply another way of telling Him: I love You.

But what do we know about God's love and our own? How are we to behave before God, with God? How can we "establish within us the most beautiful, the best-ordered of kingdoms for God?" Father d'Alzon answers: "By the searchings of faith, the yearnings and trust of hope, the raptures of love."

It should not surprise us to encounter the theological virtues here, since they are the three great wellsprings of fidelity to God. For Father d'Alzon, whenever there are questions of living out something with God, and hence of letting Him reign within us, we are speaking of sentiments, relationships, and progress. This necessarily comes down to believing in God, trusting God, and loving God.

In establishing the identity between the Kingdom of God within us and our theological life, we discern the ultimate meaning of Father d'Alzon's spirituality. We began with the theological virtues seen in the light of faith-love. Now that we have come to the end of our inquiry, to this ART which synthesizes his thought and action, we discover that the theological virtues are the three essential relationships through which God's Kingdom is concretely established within us: We accept His Revelation and place our faith in Him; we receive His promises and put our trust in Him; we open ourselves to His love and try to raise our capacities for love up to this dazzling encounter.

There is great unity in Father d'Alzon's thought. His two great intuitions, the theological life and the Kingdom, permeate all his writings and are so intimately interrelated that we find many repetitions. It would be appropriate to cite texts here on the life of faith, trust, and love, but it seems wiser to refer the reader to Chapter III above on Father d'Alzon's concept of faith-love.

However, in view of his stern admonishments about living under the hand of God, under the dominion of Christ, I shall present some of them pell-mell to illustrate what he included in his command to "let God reign within us."

“You are not sufficiently aware of Our Lord’s rights over your soul. When will you refuse Him nothing, nothing, nothing? You are suffocating, you are hemmed in, you need the immensity of God... You need to work at living the life of faith... Be a daughter of faith. Seek God in all your actions. Everything must begin for you with Our Lord, every thing must return to him, everything in you must be directed toward this center... I shall imperturbably repeat over and over to you in every possible way: God is waiting for you. God wants you to belong to Him totally... You must draw every thing from the life and thoughts of Our Lord so that you may do whatever you do in a divine way... Don’t bother your head over finding out if you are too much attached to the things of this earth; concern yourself with knowing if you find all your delight in God... I don’t like Massillon’s despairing manner very much, he damns us by dint of threatening us with hell. While speaking about the justice of God, we must always speak of His mercy: there is something in our filial trust that touches His heart most... You must make every thing nurture your love of God.”

God reigns in a human heart when that heart lives by love, by all the loves that Father d’Alzon so often enumerates: love of God-Trinity, love of Jesus Christ, love of Mary, love of the Church, and hence of all the men and women for whom the Church exists. He points out: “The love of God, as it grows, transforms all other loves.” Our horizons open out from the Kingdom within us to the Kingdom around us.

The Kingdom Around Us

When Father d’Alzon speaks of the Kingdom, he never stops at this Kingdom *within us*. He immediately adds:

and around us.

He links the two loves so closely that for him mysticism and the apostolate are inseparable.

Adveniat Regnum Tuum

goes forth from our hearts to conquer the world. It’s just too bad if the notion of conquest shocks those who no longer dare to say

Thy Kingdom Come

except in a whisper. That was not Father d’Alzon’s style. To conquer the world for God, to actualize the ART involves both conquering hearts one by one and building communities and societies where faith and love reign. The Kingdom is at once a gathering and a spiritual climate.

That is why, for Father d’Alzon, the Church is everything: it is the Kingdom on the march, the beginning of the prodigious ultimate gathering in which *God will be all in all* (Co 15:28), a

beautiful definition of the Kingdom.

Even here and now the Kingdom exists wherever men and women practice justice and brotherhood and thereby love God, even if they do not realize it (cf. Mt 25:40).

The Church is not the Kingdom, but the two can be identified, as Father d'Alzon does, in the sense that the Church is the sacrament of the Kingdom, a sign that is a reality. The Church prepares the way for the Kingdom and makes it visible by her holiness when she is manifestly the locus where men and women seek God's will. But the Church is also a sign of the Kingdom in her very imperfections which demonstrate how much we must await from God alone in order to pass from the Church to the Kingdom.

To establish the Kingdom around us is, concretely speaking, to serve the Church, to serve the Kingdom by multiplying the persons and places that are drawn to God. The moment *Thy Kingdom Come* truly becomes for us a cry of love, it cannot fail to be transformed into zeal.

Zeal? Scarcely have I uttered the word that I realize how its meaning has been devalued. In today's world, it makes us think of *zealots*, *fanatics*. On the other hand, we must come to the defense of all the words describing the ART in Father d'Alzon's view: zeal, self-sacrifice, self-giving, and even "apostolate"!

Why do these words sometimes make us smile with pity or embarrassment? Yet what they say is extraordinary: let go of unimportant things and dedicate yourself to great things. Writing to his novices in 1868, Father d'Alzon said: "You will have magnificent things to accomplish in order to make the Kingdom come. May the beauty of the Kingdom fill you with rapturous ardor. Why was the world created if not for the sake of the Kingdom?"

Thy Kingdom Come is not a tranquil prayer for Father d'Alzon. It launches him into the imprudence that he so often exalted: "O prudent ones, Jesus Christ was very foolhardy when He died on the Cross; the martyrs and the apostles were foolish when they bore witness to the Resurrection. We, too, are foolish, we are jealous of the martyrs' audacity, the apostles' temerity; it is with such audacity we claim to love the Church and to serve her, paying little heed to the judgments of others, bearing in mind that the world was saved by the folly of preaching."

4

The Apostle's Gaze

The motto ART is first of all a way of seeing the world. When Father d'Alzon looked around him, he was consumed with the passion to make God better known and loved in the world that was coming into being. We see things differently. Our passion would be rather to contribute to making people, the great multitude of ordinary people, less downtrodden and happier.

We could not have expected Father d'Alzon to bypass knowledge and love of God and devote himself at once to achieving happiness for humankind through the social struggle. As he saw it, God alone can make us happy. The events of 1848 did not shake the certitude he had when he was 20 years old: if you love your brother, give God to him.

We can debate over the value of this shortcut, but we must not forget the *real* world we are continuing to build with loud cries of "Justice!" And with just as many doubts about calling upon God's help and
hanging men's hearts. c

We are well aware that we must *also* change social structures. Father d'Alzon was not at all indifferent to the social repercussions of faith. That is a very explicit aspect of his *Adveniat Regnum Tuum* (ART). Yet he realized above all (and don't we realize it too?) that only hearts that have been transformed can create human structures and keep them human.

Father d'Alzon saw in the ART "around us" the exact extension of the ART "within us": just as I want my life to be a kingdom for God, I want the lives of my brothers and sisters to be this same kingdom. What a world that would be! Are these dreams of Christianity, of theocracy? Yes, they are, but we can approach the question in a different way: Are the men and women over whom God reigns as equally unskilled builders of the world as other men and women? I am not speaking of indecisive Christians. I am saying: men and women over whom God reigns.

We cannot elude the fact that there is something about Father d'Alzon's view of his own time that shocks us: his hatred of the Revolution. It led him at times to write frenzied pages about it, such as this description of French morals in 1873: "Voltaire and his sarcasms, the press and its obscenities, the conceit of science, impatience with the yoke of God, the need to believe nothing at all in order to affirm the right to do anything at all: that is the foundation on which the new social strata have claimed to build. To rebel against everything, to lay claim to everything: gold, pleasure, power. By means of robbery, orgies, and revolutions, to proceed with hatred, lies, and violence, is this not the summary of the new rights?"⁵ Zounds, what an indictment! And at the head of the list that he called "The Battles," he wrote: "The struggle against the Revolution."

Only by entering into his frame of mind can one understand that the Revolution means Rebellion, the anti-ART. For him the great crime is to snatch men and women from the faith. "Since the Revolution is in its essence the radical negation of God's rights, it establishes a perpetual rebellion of man against God — We must oppose the plenitude of truth to this absolutism of denials through which the Revolution, in all its forms, claims to crush the various affirmations of our faith."⁶

When we have grasped this very pure and fundamental reaction that remains a very precious lesson whenever there is question of revolution, we can accept more mixed reactions. Father d'Alzon, an intelligent man, was a conservative who adapted wonderfully to evolutionary change, but who always abhorred disorder. As a result, he did not delve into the basic questions of the revolution: what order and what disorder? He remained traumatized (and we can scarcely blame him for it) by his childhood as an aristocrat born in 1810: the Revolution smashed existing conditions. It became the incarnation of disorder.

Nevertheless, his ideas did evolve. Beginning in 1868 he turned his eyes to "the disappearing societies and advancing democracy."

"The disappearing societies. The Church has always upheld the principle of authority. She must not work for the ruin of anything; she must maintain what is established, even when she suffers from it. She desires the downfall of no one. But if upheavals do occur, she lets them take place and tries to profit from them. Corrupt societies will fall and the ties binding the Church to them will be loosened and she will forge with younger societies new links adapted to their new forms.

The advancing democracy. Kings have gone. Aristocrats are disappearing: The middle class is

very weak against the incoming tide. We must make every effort to have as much contact as possible with the common people. We must engage in apostolates to the common people.”

7

I was tempted to rewrite this quotation, leaving out a few embarrassing expressions. Had I done so, the essential thought would have won out: the apostle's calm gaze on what is decayed and what is new. But the text as written is much more significant. It shows how hard it is to extricate oneself from the past even when one is firmly resolved to do so.

The Qualities of the Apostle

Father d'Alzon's ART is not simply a matter of seeing, it is also a resolute participation in everything that is being sought and created. What qualities does he consider of fundamental importance for this activity? Without hesitation he demands first of all selflessness: "Work for Our Lord, increase His influence and not your own. Bring Jesus Christ to souls; do not impose yourself on them."⁸

To work for oneself, he explains, is to surrender to the intoxication of being busy; it is wanting to be recognized, wanting to please this person or that. Now, these attitudes are certainly not abhorrent in themselves, but they do not constitute the Kingdom, they are distractions from God.⁹ The result is lack of freedom, lack of constancy, lack of humility in failure, and above all, lack of a very pure spirit of service. "We remember that Our Lord came not to be served but to serve; we shall place ourselves in humble dependence with respect to the souls we shall be called on to help. We are to remember that these souls have rights over us, and that we have only the right conferred on us by Our Lord to lead them to the perfection that is truly their own... We shall hold cheap everything that concerns us personally, provided Jesus Christ is proclaimed... I say that narrow, selfish, mean sentiments in the presence of such a high vocation, is abominable... With a motto like ART we are obligated to give ourselves totally."

10

The apostle's second quality: the typical free and joyous courage of the Acts: *The apostles for their part left the Sanhedrin full of joy that they had been judged worthy of ill-treatment for the sake of the Lord Jesus*

(5:41). Father d'Alzon wants this apostolic freedom to be assured by a life totally dedicated to prayer and the Word (Ac 6:4). "To achieve this, we shall seek that type of independence provided by the absence of material concerns. Those who desire earthly riches are the slaves of

those who can satisfy them: those who seek only their daily bread and their minimum bodily needs are strong against obstacles and seductions. Apostolic poverty guarantees nobility of character. Unless the apostles are selfless, they cannot convert anyone.”

11

The third quality: efficacy, and hence the need to focus sharply on the objective in view and to work in unison with others. We get the impression that Father d’Alzon had to struggle against the splintering of apostolic action: “It is painful to see energies dispersed and to lose the fruits that a unified plan of action would produce.”¹²

He could not resist making military comparisons: “You are to act with the greatest possible unity, striving to march like an army whose strength lies in the unity of its command and whose defeat is assured when soldiers fight according to their own whims.”¹³

Drawing up the balance sheet of the projects the young congregation had launched, he again issued a warning: “Is it not to be feared that in turning our minds in so many different directions we are spreading our forces too thin? Our life consists in a way of thinking that must be the basis of our life in common and must tie together all our efforts... We want to make the Kingdom of God come on earth. Everything about our life, our thoughts, must be subordinated to this basic intuition. Let us see how we should utilize our energies and push forward with a certain unity. We must do this through teaching, theological study, assistance given to certain congregations of women, and by participating in the life of our society.”¹⁴

For the success of this enlarged and yet unified apostolate Father d’Alzon depended on the Third Orders, which he considered “the nucleus of all programs directed to the working classes.”

15

For Father d’Alzon, the Apostolate is Always a Matter of Teaching

Thus, the ART assumes two essential aspects: teaching and *social* action, in the broad sense of all action that impels groups to move forward. In fact, not only is teaching the primary objective, but it is practically the only one. For when Father d’Alzon speaks of the apostolate he always has the doctrinal apostolate in mind: ‘teaching in all its forms.’

This can mean teaching in the strict sense of the word in a school, but it can also mean going out among people, being attentive to the way they are living in order to tell them Jesus Christ is present within their very way of life.

The essential vocation of the Assumption consists in instilling the faith into persons of all ages and into all social levels. To enlighten, to inform, to train, in “all the works by which the common people can be uplifted, instructed, taught to live moral lives.”¹⁶ Is this a protective approach? Yes, and very much in line with the times. But if some are shocked by the idea that anyone would want to “moralize” and protect the downtrodden, it could be pointed out that they themselves receive great protection from their culture. Without culture, the common people are defenseless against ideas. To love the common people, to protect them is to educate them. This is quite obvious in Latin America where consciousness-raising is actually the greatest act of love.

In order to educate others, one must educate oneself. This is one of those fundamental truths that are not readily accepted, to judge by Father d’Alzon’s appeals: “As an apostle, I must know the truth. Even if I have little time to study, I shall study as best I can. Faith can move mountains, but it must be ready to work hard to combat the objections raised by sloth and indifference.”¹⁷

Here we come again to the combative spirit: “To fight with one’s pen...To serve the truth...In the very first place: education... To organize courses and conversations to attract those who are eager to learn...To root our teaching in Catholic truth... To bring light to the working classes.”

Turning Toward the Common People

The working classes! In 1868 Father d’Alzon turned his attention to the common people, and very ambitiously orientated his religious toward what he called “the masses.” Never did the vastness of an objective pose a problem for him. Three religious began to care for orphans and the needs of laborers, and he said: “We are reaching out to the masses.” Three religious were sent to the Near East, and he announced: “We are attacking the schism.” Three religious set out for Australia and he spoke of “our foreign missions.” He had the supreme apostolic gift of starting out under the most inauspicious conditions and then having things work out. Thus the following programs for “the masses” began: the alummates, the pilgrimages, the publications.

Father d'Alzon was anti-bourgeois; he hated the egoism, the love of comfort, and the fears of these passionate individualists. He sympathized with the lowly, the little folk of Nîmes, the farm boys of the Alummates, Father Pernet and his Sisters dedicated to laborers, the first Oblates, "his mountain women." He refused to let them have lay sisters, and this shows how far he had come since the time he had willingly accepted lay sisters among the Sisters of the Assumption.

Writing from Rome in 1870 to Marie Correnson, he said: "The time of the Lay Sisters is past; we must set aside aristocratic forms. We are going forward toward a democracy whose demands are formidable. What I am observing here (at Vatican I) is that the place of honor certainly does not belong to the Hungarian bishops who are the last great lords of Europe. It belongs to the missionary bishops who travel to the Council on foot. My weakness for the Oblates is their humbler spirit that is better suited to reaching out to a portion of the world that Our Lord loves in a very special way and which must be our first concern.¹⁸ During the last twelve years of his life he was to send everyone out on "the royal road of love for the little ones, the poor, all the forsaken ones."¹⁹

Yet here we discern the discrepancy between his personal convictions and the ideas of his time that had rubbed off on him: "You rich, attend to the poor, calm them by dint of alms; you poor, resign yourselves by thinking of heaven; and all of you, be sure to love one another."

The great problem as he saw it was hatred. In 1873 he referred to: "these social hatreds whose devastations Paris is still contemplating." That was indeed the purpose of the ART: to build a world in which people love one another. But that presupposed a certain equality and social justice. He did not see, he did not analyze the reasons for the anger of the working people, the cursed chain: factory—slum—tavern. As he saw it, very evil people were setting the poor against the rich: "See the fury of the lower classes rising against the upper classes. The appetites of the common people are flattered, the most subversive ideas are whispered to them." It never occurred to him that there was an intolerable poverty that could be mitigated by a more equitable distribution. No, all that was needed was to promote the peaceful coexistence of the poor and rich.

Here is his appeal to the rich: "Be generous, alms will appease the poor man's anger, and then dispose him to accept his indigence when he sees that you are divesting yourselves for him. The more you give, the more he will understand that happiness does not reside in gold —"²⁰

He spoke of the “consternation of the great leaders of industry who, for all their royal generosity in charitable works, think they see signs of civil war. For the poor man, the proletarian, is filled with hatred, he rejects brotherliness. Why? Try to find the answer. He wants more than he has and he wants it for his enjoyment.”²¹

So these ideas were being bandied about? And Father d’Alzon adopted them as his own, going so far as to speak of “the ferocity of the workers’ appetites.”²² Let us pause to reflect once more, but this time as much about ourselves as about Father d’Alzon. What current ideas do we adopt as our own, how keen is our vision as apostles? It is only with such modesty and loyalty that we can allow ourselves to draw a lesson from Father d’Alzon’s face-to-face encounter with the social realities of his time.

Needless to say, we would have preferred to see him more open to what was going on around him. Only eleven years after his death Pope Leo XIII would come to grips with the situation in his Encyclical *Rerum Novarum*: “Isolated and defenseless workers have found themselves at the mercy of inhuman employers and in the cupidity of frenzied competition... To which must be added the monopoly of production and commerce, which have become the portion of a small number of wealthy owners who impose an almost servile yoke on the proletarian masses.... It is shameful and inhuman to use a man as if he were a vile tool of lucre, and to respect him only in proportion to the strength of his arms (2 and 10).”

Father d’Alzon didn’t go that far. And yet, a cry of anguish reveals that he was coming close to it: “Why are the workers not with us? Please God to send many apostles into that portion of His vineyard.”²³ He sensed far better than other spiritual writers of his time that alms became derision in the face of current problems: France has 160,000 factories where generally speaking the haughty despotism of the employer toward the worker and the deep hatred of the worker toward the employer can make us foresee disasters. Yet wherever the employers have gone to the workers not merely with alms in hand but with programs inspired by intelligent charity, the workers’ efficiency increased, morals improved, profits multiplied, and, as a final reward, a sincere reconciliation was achieved on the ashes of extinguished hatreds.”²⁴

Should we smile or grind our teeth? Rather we should measure the distance that led him from the theological virtues to the factories. This theological route will always be the one the apostle takes. What can an apostle bring to any kind of a world if he, for his part, does not come from God’s world? He will be an apostle only through the power of faith, hope, and charity. That is Father d’Alzon’s masterful intuition, and anyone who hesitates on that has already ceased to be a worker of the ART.

Withal, our own time has taught us to plunge the theological virtues into the very heart of a social reality that is more clearly understood. Our faith must cast greater light on what men and women are actually living through, our hope must be more closely attuned to their hopes, and above all our charity must reject any cohabitation whatever with injustice.

We can repeat with Father d'Alzon that the great evils are ignorance and lies, and that we must serve and propagate the truth.²⁵ We can share his passion for truth and his determination to teach. But we must do so realizing that social truth does not stem directly from the Gospel; it must be sought through analyses of social reality. It can only be sought more effectively and more finely honed by the Gospel people. Even so, they must commit themselves totally to this study of reality without which the battles of the ART run the risk of being fought behind the lines or on the periphery of every-day life.

During the period of the industrial revolution, there was a dearth of apostles for the industrial revolution. It is not enough to say *Thy Kingdom come*. It is necessary to discern where and how it can come.

CHAPTER XIV

“WHAT ARE WE TO THINK? WHAT ARE WE TO DO? LAUNCH OUT!”

Why are you sleeping

while a world is being born?

And now, if anyone were to ask me to choose one word to characterize Father d'Alzon, I would say: *The questioner!*

When he was young he used to harass his friends: What kind of a life are you leading? What are you fighting for? His whole life was one big question of burning faith: Lord Jesus, who are you? When at the age of fifty-five, he put the finishing touches to the *Directory*, he bequeathed 40 implacable examens to his religious. From the beginning to the end of his life he never ceased asking the Catholic multitudes: Why are you sleeping while a world is being born?

He wakes us up. As soon as we read twenty lines of his writings we are harpooned by his two obsessions: "What are we to think? What are we to do?" While others are morosely measuring their strengths and weaknesses, he thinks only of goading everybody to their maximum effectiveness. At the 1873 Chapter he was forced to admit: "There are only fifty of us." But he quickly catches himself: "We must act as if we were a thousand. What immense horizons are opening up before you!"

It is this dynamism that draws us to him. Never mind if his words are old-fashioned, never mind his exaggerations, the holes in his analyses. We are swept along by his underlying power. We had imprisoned ourselves in our daily tasks, our horizons were narrow, and now his imperious voice opens the windows: "What is the state of the world? What are you doing for the Kingdom?"

I listen to what he said as a seminarian of twenty-two. He had just heard once more in the *Letter to the Ephesians*

(5:14-15) a trumpet call that was not about to displease him:

"Awake, O sleeper, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light. Keep careful watch over your conduct. Do not act like fools, but like thoughtful men. Make the most of the present opportunity, for these are evil days."

And that got him started, he spoke bluntly to Luglien his beloved friend: "This text is for you, it condemns three-fourths of all Christians. The pagans can say: *I yielded to the torrent*. Those who do not have faith can claim that, living a time of doubt, they shared in the general blindness. But Christians? Do they think everything has been said when they claim they had to adapt to circumstances and could not reform their century, and that if they wasted time it was because there was no good to be done. How many people, both old and young, shake their heads and say:

These are evil days,

and they go to sleep over it, they groan, and insist, with tears in their eyes, that God has forced them to live in a very terrible time for the friends of religion; and then they fold their arms. The cowards! Don't they know that the Christian's fatherland is a battlefield?"

1

The years passed, he continued to be the same town crier. In November, 1869, on the eve of Vatican Council I, he who had fought only for the Church again asked his life-long question: in a world that is turning away from the Church, what must be the Church's attitude?

He answered: "The Church must not be reconciled with society, but must convert it: not by concessions but by more abundant lights, by more powerful action. The Council must sanctify us. Every century has its own vices; we must above all have the virtues that are contrary to these vices. It is in this sense that we must belong to our own times."²

When Vatican Council I was in full swing, he wrote from Rome to the Assumptionist Fathers in Paris, reviving the feverish question: What are we to do? "It is important that we really understand before God what we have to do. You must gather around you lay persons, priests, and by your conversations strive to attract to the life of the Council all the intellects over which you can have some influence. The Council will sum up its findings in a new treatise on religion and the Church. Take these questions in hand. Take on their spirit, infuse it everywhere, even at the risk of sometimes being boring... Think of all kinds of popular works either getting involved in them yourselves, or above all urging Catholics to get involved in them."³

You must... Take on... Urge... He will never let us rest. He could not stand to have anyone yield to the current when the need was to fashion one's own life and make history.

Thy Kingdom Come!

To encourage broad perspectives and forceful action, he offers us a spirit. It's quite simple. It befits an apostle who wants to communicate essential matters to many people: love Christ and love the Church. Our times would readily separate the two loves, retaining only the first. Father d'Alzon shows us that to say "No" to the Church is to say "No" to Christ.

His charism consists in bringing unity almost everywhere we bring division. For him, all our loves reside in Christ, and all of our fraternal activity is carried on within the Church, which is the work of Christ, the body of Christ. And everything that we love and build can be expressed in the shortest and most compact of prayers: *Thy Kingdom come!* To establish the Kingdom of Christ within us and around us, that's what Father d'Alzon is all about.

Even the briefest encounter with him brings us face-to-face with Christ. To describe Christ, to express the love of the young congregation of the Assumption, he spoke stirring words straight from his heart: "We love Jesus Christ with the love of the earliest times."

How did those who knew Jesus in Palestine, who lived by the earliest accounts and by the Holy Spirit, love Jesus Christ? How did the man love Christ, who dared to say: "We love Him with the love of the earliest times?" At the origin of great creations there is soaring enthusiasm, fire. Father d'Alzon rediscovered this fiery enthusiasm. He used to say: "My life is Christ," just as St. Paul had once said. If he succeeds in getting us to say this with the same zeal, we are truly fortunate.

That is the meaning of the cry: *Thy Kingdom come!* It is not first of all a cry of concern and anxiety, but the irruption within us of Messianic joy:
the Kingdom is coming!

If we don't see this, if we are chilled by God's silence and by silence about God, Father d'Alzon tells us: "You have not enough faith, not enough hope, not enough love."

Here is one of his amazing simplifications: relate everything to the theological virtues. If you know God, if you believe He loves you, if you hope He will give you what you need to labor in the vineyards of the Kingdom, you cannot be petty or sad. Both of these states irritated Father d'Alzon. He once wrote to Mother Marie Eugénie: "I admire you for having time to be sad!"

Time is for love and to prove one's love. Time is for the Church. Because in the Church we can love effectively. And first of all, we can love Christ. At times we think of the Church as the People of God, and then again as Rome. For Father d'Alzon the Church is the locus of Christ's life and action here and now. His salvific action! His love in action! I cannot love my brothers and sisters more effectively than by working for the Church that gives Jesus Christ to the multitudes.

With his genius for uniting things that are apparently contradictory, Father d'Alzon practiced both one-on-one activity and wide-ranging activity with large groups. He could waste endless time for Mother Marie Eugénie, for twenty women directees and for his ten religious of the early days, and still retain his deep concern for the *common people*, fight furious battles for education, and encourage popular programs for the masses: the pilgrimages, the hurly-burly of *Our Lady of Salvation*, his publishing venture, and Father Pernet's Little Sisters dedicated to the working class.

More and more his great concern turned toward the masses, the nobodies, the poor. His hatred of the Revolution, his violent diatribes against modern society are intolerable if we don't understand they are all sufferings born of love: "They are snatching God away from the common people."

He knew the rich (in every sense of the term) can find God in their own homes, in small groups, with profound books, beautiful prayers and subtle conversations. But the poor? If it were not for the Church, who would give them Jesus Christ? Who would read the Gospel to them, who would teach them to pray very simply? By Father d'Alzon's side we understand that to love the Church is to love the poor and the dispossessed, to defend them against those who confuse them and lead them astray.

Being Magnificently Alive

For this service to men and women through the Church, Father d'Alzon wanted individuals of noble character. I think no spiritual leader has ever given so much importance to human qualities. He wanted crystal-clear Christians who make one want to believe just by seeing their limpidity and courage. That is why he was so merciless toward the flabby, the insincere, the domineering. For instance, he described the clergy of France in his day as follows:

“The priesthood wanted to dominate. This led to resistances and clashes that ended in isolation. When the priesthood lost contact, it finally ignored practical needs and very real conditions. This resulted in deplorable impotence. The priest’s word has become a dead letter. He talks a foreign language: he comes to solve objections that are no longer relevant, he refutes errors that have been forgotten and that are now being replaced by other errors, by other objections that he does not perceive.

“He [the priest] sets theological science in opposition to religious ignorance, but the other sciences raise their difficulties and he has not engaged in the study of these sciences that are at war with him; he remains in the realm of mysticism and he is asked for facts, history, arguments. He no longer preaches to a throng, he has retained only an audience of devout ladies.

“To rectify all this there is need to guard against pride, isolation, ignorance. It is necessary to become a layman in a certain sense, to bring about a reunion, a fusion. Even while we isolate ourselves through the religious life we must resume interrupted communications and breathe the air of the secular world.”⁴

Father d’Alzon used to say: “I want religious who, when they come from mental prayer, throw themselves fully into life.” He knew that listening to God makes listening to men more acute. Time after time in his letters we come upon some precious counsel. For example, the following reflection concerning serious sins which, it seemed to him, tended to provoke excessive repression: “We have considered only a very minute part of a question when we have emphasized only its abuses. We must take precautions against abuses, but to take excessive precautions is the greatest of abuses.”⁵

It is the hallmark of those who are magnificently alive to be able to pass with ease from the broadest horizons to this tranquil wisdom, and from long prayers to action on all fronts. For they are the ones who unite depth with what appears only on the surface. I have watched Father d’Alzon so long that I can no longer separate him from the words of St. Irenaeus: “*The glory of God is a man who is magnificently alive*”

I want to close with Father d’Alzon’s own words:

“Our Lord said: *I have come to set a fire*. Whoever wants to join in the work of Jesus Christ must be ablaze with an immense love. That is the Apostle’s cry:

The love of Christ impels us

(2 Cor 5:14).”

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The references will be made to Roman Numerals. The Volumes will be indicated in Arabic numbers. For example, a reference to p. 329 of Volume Four of the Letters will be indicated: III, 4, p. 329.

A few of these works exist in English translation:

The Directory

The Foundational Documents

The Circular Letters

Sketches by H. D. Galeran

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Edgar A. Bourque, A. A.

NOTES

In the English edition of this work, some of the endnotes which were present in the French edition have been changed to footnotes, denoted by an asterisk. Therefore, there might be a minor discrepancy in endnote numbering when comparing the versions.

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When the Assumptionists celebrated the anniversary of their founder's death, Father André Sève was inspired to write a book on one of the spiritual masters of the nineteenth century: Emmanuel d'Alzon (1810-1880). The author has chosen to play the role of guide through the writings of Father d'Alzon. His book is not intended to be a learned biography. Instead, he uses the skills of his trade: his power of observation and his ability to get to what is essential in a person's life and writings. The result is an exciting book on an important figure of the last century. *Christ Is My Life* makes it easy for us to meet a man of great depth who influenced the Church and the world of his time. The primacy he gives to the supernatural, his love of Christ, his Trinitarian spirituality, his commitment to active contemplation, the attention he gives to the rights of God, his dedication to study, and his zeal for the Kingdom of God are a source of inspiration for anyone interested in the renewal of the Church today.

André Sève, A. A. is one of the outstanding spiritual writers in France today. A journalist by trade, he first gained popularity through film reviews and interviews of famous people. One of his books on meditation, *Thirty Minutes for God*, has sold over one hundred thousand copies. In his crisp, journalistic style, he writes simply and profoundly about our dialogue with God.

* translator's note: *The Camisards were Protestants of the Cévennes Mountains who took up arms over the revocation of the Edict of Nantes (1685). They were so-called because they wore tunics (camiso in the dialect) over their clothes.*

* *The two types of writing are really different. In an official bishop's letter concerning the death of his bishop he writes: "We saw our devout prelate while his body was weakening" (Lettres, Vol. IV, p. 581). But in a personal letter he commented: "One would have thought he had forgotten to get himself buried."*

* We recommend the reading of the remarkable book 1848 by Pierre Pierrard, (Paris, Desclée, 1977). For example, the life of workers as described by Doctor Guépin: "It is there in open sewers on the street, where the air is cold and damp as in a cellar, where feet slip on dirty ground, where everything is filthy and miserable, that men work fourteen hours a day for a wage of fifteen to twenty cents, often without heat in winter, by the light of candles at night" (p. 15).

* *Ecrits spirituels*, p. 133. Comparisons with other religious authorities of that time show that Father d'Alzon's apostolic passion was much purer —and more modest! In 1847 the Bishop of Orleans also wrote: "We are intolerant, like the truth whose athletes and ministers we are, like the soldier who remains at his post, like the magistrate who administers the law" (Pierrard, 1848 p. 173).

* Sage, A., *Un maître spirituel...* p. 30, and especially the vigorous meditation on the theme: "Cast aside your own sentiments and take on those of Jesus Christ."

* translator's note: Perhaps this is true in France, but it certainly does not seem to apply to the American mentality.

* *Ecrits spirituels* p. 1230 to 1232. The text follows: "If you kiss your crucifix with love in the morning when you arise and you promise yourself to carry your cross throughout the day, walking in the footsteps of the Divine Crucified. If during your meditation you intend to immolate yourself at the altar of Jesus' sacrifice. If to arouse your fervor you place your hand on your crucifix from time to time, if you hold it more tightly in moments of anxiety or temptation. If when you are about to set out to do a good work, you adore Him remembering that it is Jesus Christ you are reaching out to in the persons of the poor; if when you are about to practice some austerity you kiss the divine wounds that are the fountains of the Church's life and wellsprings of our purification. If you go in the evening to his feet to give an account of your day, of your pride in the face of his abasement, of your vanities in the face of his humiliations, of your cowardice in the face of his anguish, of your sloth in the face of his sweats, of your egoism in the presence of his infinite love, of your impatience, vexations, failures in charity in the face of his patience and unchangeable gentleness, your crucifix will become a friend. Or to put it another way, Our Lord will love you, instruct you, strengthen you through his image. You will allow yourself to be carried away by love; and then all of life, all knowledge, all happiness will be summed up in these words: 'Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ crucified.'"

** This is about a discussion over their friendship that he considers to be a means, but it seems to me that the advice applies very well to prayer.*

** translator's note: It should be noted that in the doctrine and prayer of all Eastern Christians, those in union with Rome and the various other Orthodox Churches, the Trinity holds the supreme and central place.*

** Ancient Prayer Over the Gifts which is used in Daily Mass II.*

** He often cites: Gal 2:20 and 4:19; Ph 1:21; Ep 3:17; Col 1: 24-35.*

** State indicates the duration, the permanence of an act. The eternization of Christ's acts is characterized by the use of the present participle. For example, Jesus was born, but he is always being born.*

** Father d'Alzon deals with the ART extensively in his Letters to his novices. References to the ART in this Chapter are taken from these Letters (No. 150 through 164).*