

AA NEWS
ASSUMPTIONIST INTERNATIONAL NEWSLETTER

A COLLECTION OF EDITORIALS BY
FR. RICHARD E. LAMOUREUX, S.S.
SUPERIOR GENERAL
1999-2011

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By Fr. Richard E. Lamoureux
Superior General

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Foreword

March 2012

These editorials were written by Fr. Richard Lamoureux during his twelve years of service as Superior General of the Assumptionists (1999–2011). They were the lead article in the Congregation’s international quarterly called *AA News*. Initially addressed almost exclusively to Assumptionist religious, they more and more took into account the growing numbers of lay men and women wanting to share the Assumptionists’ charism and mission. They reflect—then as well as now—concerns of the Assumptionist family and issues facing the Church and the world.

“Caring for the goose”

September 1999

Ever hear Aesop’s fable about the goose that laid the golden egg? The farmer was at first incredulous that the goose could produce such a thing, but day after day the beast kept producing the genuine product. The farmer became more and more wealthy, and more and more greedy. He wanted more, more than one egg a day. And in a fit of passionate greed, he grabbed the goose, shook its neck, and split it open to get at all the eggs that lay hidden inside. He found none. The goose was gone, and never again laid an egg, golden or otherwise.

Believe me, all of that has something to do with the General Council and the meetings we've been having for the past three weeks.

I'll eventually send a long report about the results of those meetings, probably in a letter to the Major Superiors, which they'll be free to publish as they see fit. For now, let me talk generally about the meetings, because I think we learned something about apostolic community that might be useful to all of you. In fact, I think what we did would be a good procedure for any community as it goes about its local chapter or any apostolic group as it begins its mission. To put what we learned in terms borrowed from Aesop: so that it would continue to produce golden eggs, we treated the goose with great care.

The meetings began on September 20, once Julio had arrived from Pomaire and René made it here from Butembo. Bernard, Marcel and I had already been in Rome for a little while. We had decided that our first three weeks together would be like a local chapter, since our goal for the General Council was to live and work as a genuine apostolic community.

Our first week, in a mountain valley south of Rome in a town called Arcinazzo, was spent in leisurely but fairly intense conversation about our *raison d'être* as a Congregation and our mission as a Council. We took time for prayer, for good Italian food, for an evening aperitivo, and for walks in the woods. The landscape was an important part of the experience.

The second week was a business meeting, in familiar surroundings at Due Pini, close to files and computers. We covered all the topics that a General Council needs to: requests for ordination and profession, distribution of tasks, follow-up to the General Chapter, preparation of sessions, etc. Efficient work, good prayer, no aperitivo's, no walks in the woods. You get the picture.

Finally, we've just returned from our third week of "meeting," a pilgrimage to Le Vigan, Rochebelle, Nîmes, Espérou, Lamalou-les-Bains, Lavagnac, Montagnac, Rochefort, and Vallebonne. That was spiced with good visits with the Orant sisters, the Oblates, the Religious of the Assumption, the Little Sisters, and of course our own brothers in Nîmes, as well as in Montpellier. In between our walks and our car rides, we read texts from d'Alzon that he produced at these various places and spent time with him ...in his room at Lavagnac, in the chapel he built at Lamalou, near the pulpit at Ste Perpétue, by his tomb in Nîmes.

So, what about the golden egg? Well, as religious living in apostolic community, we are on fire with the mission, eager to roll up our sleeves and give ourselves at the service of others and the Kingdom. We're interested in lots of golden eggs; we want to be fruitful and successful in our work for the Lord. And that's as it should be. The Lord did not call us to twiddle our thumbs or fail miserably at our task: he wanted us to bear fruit and to do so abundantly.

But what will allow us to bear fruit, to lay the golden egg each day consistently? Doing some of the things we did during the past three weeks allowed us to care for the goose: we got to know each other by talking about our lives up until now, our personal ambitions, our gifts, our particular style; we prayed as the Church suggests and we used the words and the thoughts that came from our heart; we recreated together around the dining room table, outdoors, visiting the sights; we gave free rein to our dreams and our ambitions about our work together and about our religious family; we touched and smelled the places that are so important to our history, and we used our imagination to conjure up these realities that in good part constitute our identity.

In terms of efficiency, all of that was probably not necessary. We on the Council tend to be efficient types; we'd probably be tempted to wring the goose's neck to get at all the golden eggs right away. But being effective is more than being efficient. For that reason we cared for the community that God has so kindly given us.

We all need to exercise such care. Major Superiors need to care for local Superiors by keeping in regular contact with them, by tending to their formation as leaders, by telling them the truth at all times but with gentleness and affection, and by thanking them nine times for every one when they need to call them to greater fidelity to their task. Local Superiors need to care for their brothers by meeting with them regularly, by asking about their work and their life of faith, by providing assistance and counsel when that seems appropriate, by seeking opportunities for the community to be together, to pray together, to recreate together. We need to care for each other and for those with whom we work each day, just because that's the Gospel way. And there's a hidden benefit: it's the most effective way to pursue our mission in the world.

You'll find in this issue of the NEWS bulletin some of the items that we worked on during these days. I'd draw your attention especially to the distribution of responsibilities among the members of the Council. We want to work as a community, but each of us has his own responsibilities. I hope that in the various areas of the Congregation the Councillor(s) assigned to you will be a helpful resource; don't hesitate to call upon them for their assistance.

I've visited some areas of the Congregation already (a small part of France, Romania, the United States, Quebec, and Italy) and will soon begin longer travels. In November, I will go to Madagascar; in December, to Brazil; in January, to other parts of Latin America; in February, to the Congo; in March and April, to various parts of Europe; in May, to Korea. Please pray for all of these visits.

“Open wide the doors!”

December 1999

Studying theology in Rome during the Council was a great experience, but theology wasn't the only thing I learned during that time. I also deepened my love of architecture and even tried my hand at painting. Fortunately, I realized quickly enough that my gift wasn't for painting, but I still remember one of those trial canvases. It was a view of the via dei Coronari from the window of my room at Tor di Nona. I was fascinated by windows and doorways and the views you could have from them. Since then, I've noticed that many artists have the same fascination. An American artist, Andrew Wyeth, comes to mind. Or just think of the many Flemish Annunciations, with windows, balconies and distant landscapes in the background. The most famous balcony and landscape is probably the one behind Mona Lisa. Why this fascination with windows and doors?

A famous door has been in the news recently. On Christmas eve, the Holy Father opened the Holy Door at St. Peter's, but even thinking of it just as an ordinary door, I find it full of meaning. In my mind's eye, I imagine the Pope, cross of Christ in hand, bathed in the light of the basilica as it pours through the newly opened door. He looks up to the source of light, raises a foot, and prepares to cross the threshold in the direction of the light that draws him.

A door opens, a first step is taken, the horizon draws us forward. I can't imagine a more compelling image of our Christian life and mission.

This year a door opens onto many different paths. There is the new millennium of course and the Jubilee year. There is our sesquicentennial celebration, the beginning of our 150th year of existence. There is the path traced out for us by the General Chapter and the “new breath” that promises to sustain us along the way. In the three very different countries that I've just visited, Romania, Madagascar, and Brazil, all blessed with many young Assumptionists in formation, it's easy to see the exciting adventures and challenges that lie ahead. In other regions where we

are located, we're probably tempted to think that the doors are closed or that we've come to the end of the road. There are indeed many different kinds of roads: the six-lane throughway that links Sao Paulo to Rio, and the rocky pot-holed dirt road (that they call a stairway rather than a road) from Androja to Ampanihy (Madagascar).

But if I'm right, for all Christians, in every circumstance, the door has just opened, and we're embarking on a pilgrimage. The image is old, but we're inclined to forget it. We naturally want to have arrived at our destination; we're not comfortable being "on the road" and would prefer to unpack and be at rest. We want rest so much that we do everything in our power to supply a solution to all of our problems, to capture the joy at hand that will satisfy us. But Augustine reminds us that our hearts are restless, full of unsatisfied longing. His advice to us: enlarge the desires of your heart, but don't try to banish them. In other words, stay on the road, hold out for the destination that will truly fill us with lasting joy.

Along the road, there will be consolations, beautiful scenery, engaging conversation, an experience of progress, and there will be times when there seem to be no advancing, when the landscape is less interesting, when the solitude is oppressive. In light of the destination, all of that seems secondary. The Italian Advent hymn gets it right: "Lift up your head and see: / on the horizon already Christ is rising." (*Risplenda nella notte una gran luce*). This is our inspiration now; it's the source of our hope. The second Synod on Europe, held here in Rome during the month of October, took that as its theme: "Jesus Christ Alive in His Church, Source of Hope for Europe."

Open wide the door, step over the threshold, with your eye on the horizon, in communion with others, walk ahead: "Grant that we might live along the way with sobriety, justice, and fervor, and in that way give witness to our hope."

This is my heartfelt wish for each of you as we begin this year of great grace!

"Ideas Matter"

March 2000

Ideas make a difference. Books make a difference... D'Alzon was a man of action, and so must

his disciples be. Daring, imagination, energy, passion for the Kingdom. An Assumptionist vocabulary that describes us.

But d'Alzon also knew the importance of a good idea: « ...The most intimate thought of my soul is that the world needs to be penetrated through and through by a Christian idea; otherwise it will fall apart. And the world will not receive this idea but from men who will be taken up with it before all else in order to proclaim it in every form that it might assume. » (Letter to Alphonse de Vigniamont, 18 March 1835) In fact, unless our thinking is sound, we might act unwittingly in a way that defeats our own desires. Augustine made that clear when talking about faith in God: « Anyone who invokes what is still unknown may be making a mistake. » (Augustine, Confessions, I,i,1) But the same is true in human affairs. If we do not have a true understanding of the human condition and our ultimate destiny, how can we make good choices each day?

This is one of the major points made by the author of the latest biography of John Paul II, George Weigel, in his book entitled *Witness to Hope* (in English, French, Spanish, and Italian editions).

Weigel's book is no simple biography. It's a long (992 pages in the English edition) reflection on the meaning of the life and work of an individual extraordinary by anyone's standards. The contents of the book are instructive as well as its method. The author's method is ambitious: he wants to present a picture of Karol Wojtyla "from inside." Weigel maintains that historical facts alone do not get to the fundamental truths about a human being. The successful biographer must somehow get beyond the external facts to discover who the person is, to consider how the person understands himself or herself to be, to perceive what is most true about the person. This is difficult to do, but it is a credit to the author that he is willing to embark on such a worthwhile investigation.

What Weigel discovers about John Paul II is that he thinks of himself most fundamentally in terms of Christian discipleship (and not in the left-right, liberal-conservative, progressive-fundamentalist terms of politics). John Paul thinks of the world not in terms of political struggle but in terms of Christ-centered hope and the unity of God's People. His "politics" is not to restore an older, autocratic Church, or a less pluralistic society, but to proclaim the saving news of Jesus Christ, the "more excellent way" revealed in God's Son.

Using this method, our author recounts the major events of Wojtyla's life and most helpfully summarizes and analyzes his most important speeches and writings. One has to admire

Weigel's capacity to articulate the unifying elements of this one man's prodigious output. Reviews of the book have noted that the author seems to be uncritical of his subject, more hagiography than history. But he remarks early on that John Paul's taste for study and conversation, as well as his capacity for friendship, reveal a man in search of understanding rather than an autocrat intent on making infallible pronouncements.

What have I discovered about John Paul through this book?

-For a man who appears in the eyes of some to be a blind defender of orthodoxy, John Paul has shown himself to be dramatically innovative in his "use" of the Papacy, reforming ancient practices and refusing to let himself be managed by the "insiders."

-He insists on maintaining at the same time that the proclamation of the Gospel must be independent of partisan politics yet courageously committed to human dignity and the defense of fundamental human rights. His goal is to shape culture through rational discourse rather than manipulate it through raw power.

-A genuine Christian spirituality must take into account the corporal nature of the human being; a Pope, a celibate, can teach in a remarkably profound way about the nature of marriage and human sexuality.

-If freedom is pruned loose from its foundation in truth, if freedom is liberation from something rather than freedom in view of something, happiness is impossible and society will dissolve.

-An old, ailing man, by the power of his spirit and faith, can make a deep impression on the apparently irreligious youth of our secular societies. Witness the effect he had on young people in Paris and in Denver.

-A Christian's greatest struggle, even beyond daily the daily moral battles, is against the temptation to lose hope, to forget that Christ has died and risen to save mankind. To forget that is to seek other saviors, other Edens.

What I find most striking in Weigel's book is his discussion of the truth that John Paul discovered about human nature and does not tire of proclaiming. It is summed up in a small phrase: the law of the gift. Inscribed in our very nature is a law that moves us outward, toward others, in service and in self-sacrificing love. We realize ourselves as human beings in giving ourselves to another, to a cause beyond us, not in protecting our "interests," limiting ourselves to our private, individual vision. Do you want to be happy? Allow yourself to be ruled by that fundamental law.

Isn't this the truth about men and women that is dramatically revealed by the crucified Christ? The glory of the cross is the truth of love that it dramatically embodies. Lent invites us to meditate on this truth. Easter invites us to rejoice and find firm hope in it. From one brother to so many others, I wish you a rich share in the grace of the risen Lord.

"Feed my sheep!"

June 2000

"Simon, Son of John, do you love me?... Do you really love me?... Then, feed my sheep."

This Jubilee year, the member of the 32nd Council of Congregation gathered each day in the crypt chapel of St. Peter in Gallicantu, worshiping in the presence of an icon depicting this memorable dialogue from chapter twenty-one of John's Gospel. On the last day of our meeting, Fr. Arnold Castro commented on the same text, given by the Church for the day before Pentecost. We were reminded again, as I said in my recent letter to all of you, the source of our mission is the fire of love that burns in our heart.

John's Gospel begins and ends with desire, expressed in a question. The disciples ask the first question: "Where do you live?" (1:38). Jesus poses the last: "Do you love me?" (21:17). The response, Jesus', is the same in both cases: follow me (1:39 and 21:19).

Peter's experience of love was a complex matter to say the least. He knew what it was to deny a friend, he experienced Jesus' faithful and gratuitous response. Being passionate for the

Kingdom has less to do with energy and zeal and more with an acute awareness of how God's love addresses itself to the particular person that I am. (See I John 4:10)

At the Council of Congregation we faced our agenda with humility and a desire to do God's work. We were also confident that He wanted to do good things for His Church through us. The agenda could have been intimidating: the future of our mission in Asia and Korea; the choice of a prophetic gesture for our centenary year; responding to the Chapter's mandate for a re-expression of the charism; and taking concrete decisions to further our collaboration with lay friends. There were other important dossiers as well (ten of them), touching on animation, internationality, formation, and finances. And I had my own concerns: my first Council of Congregation as Superior General, my determination to listen attentively, and my desire to provide useful and inspiring leadership.

This issue of our newsletter tells you about our decisions. Behind the decisions there was a good amount of work, some painful and complex issues to deal with, and the resulting fatigue. But most important was an abiding, peaceful openness to the Spirit. An attention to the breath of fresh air that we've been sensing since the Chapter and even before. And at the end, during the evaluation, the understated but hope-filled statement by one of the most seasoned members of the Council: "I believe something is stirring in our midst."

We know what's in our heart, and it's not simply something to be proud of. But we also know how much he cares for us and wants to confide in us.

We especially need to hear these words of hope and of mission when we know how deep the need is. In the middle of our Council deliberations, I received the following request from one of our confreres in Kinshasa:

Could you do me a favor? Please go to the pit under the church at St. Peter, where memory is made of Jesus as prisoner and hostage of the powerful of this world. There offer the Congolese people to the Lord... Since last Monday, in Kisangani, armies from Rwanda and Uganda have been fighting each other. There's been a lot of damage: shells hit the cathedral of Our Lady of the Rosary and completely destroyed it; the hydroelectric plant that supplies the village was likewise damaged, as well as the General Hospital, the university clinic and campus, and a number of schools and the mission development center. Hundreds were killed. Bodies are piling up along the road because people do not dare to leave the safety of their homes. A thousand wounded without medical attention, without water, without medicine, without electricity...

Well-organized genocide, as a UN observer remarked. Otherwise, the West is silent.

Yes, what is in man's heart is clear. But what is in God's is equally clear.

“Feed my sheep... Feed my sheep... Feed my sheep.”

“Transformed by Love”

September 2000

It was during the Offertory procession. A long line of children and young people walked past the seated row of concelebrants where I had been placed. We were part of the thousands who had gathered at the outdoor altar in the Prairy at Lourdes for the Eucharistic celebration on August 15th. This was my first experience of the annual National Pilgrimage. And it was a special celebration since so many Assumptionists had gathered to celebrated our anniversary year.

The young people walked slowly by, while the choir sang softly. So many boys and girls, so many young adults, the sick carried in stretchers or simply given a hand by a volunteer. And then two passed directly in front of me. I won't forget them. One, perhaps 19 years old, tall, dressed in a scout's uniform, a nice smile. He held to his chest a young boy. It was hard to tell his age; perhaps 10. Wasted by his illness, with no strength left in his muscles, totally dependent. He was held under the arms by his older friend. They faced forward. Both radiant.

One so poor and so weak, and yet he did something for his friend that someone more powerful would have been unable to do. The other strong and vigorous, but his greatest strength came entirely from his younger friend.

I remembered Michelangelo's Rondanini Pietà. A vertical composition. From the front, it looks like the Virgin is supporting the body of her dead son, who falls to the ground. When you walk around the statue, however, you discover that the “dead” body is supporting his mother, who leans on his shoulders.

One of the things that draws us to the mission, like the young scout I saw at Lourdes, was this desire to do something good for another. But as the years pass we discover something unexpected: that we are the ones to whom something good has been done. That poor, crippled youth was the Christ who carries us and transforms us. Slowly, slowly, for many of us, we discover just how much he has loved us, just how powerfully the weakness of another has transformed us.

I've invited the entire Congregation to "fall in love again" with the Assumption and with the one who has called us in the depth of our heart. If you're looking for the "secret" of renewal, of reform, of greater fervor in our religious family, look no further. Expect to find it in no other place.

This is an invitation I've made to all of you. Do I really think I can reach you all? Perhaps I can reach fifteen of you. Which fifteen? Why not my closest co-workers, my own Council and the vice/Provincials. If these fifteen take seriously the invitation, perhaps they will each call fifteen others. That's all it takes to begin well.

So this is not a letter for all of you, dear brothers. It's a letter for each member of my Council and the Council of Congregation. I don't mind if the rest of you read along.

Richard E. Lamoureux, a.a.,

Superior General

"Can we live without the East?"

December 2000

I remember my first exposure to the Byzantine liturgy; it was not a good experience. I was visiting a small Orthodox church in the center of Athens. I arrived at what I thought was the

beginning of the celebration, but I admit it wasn't easy to know quite when it began (or ended for that matter). The "parishioners" drifted in and out during the entire ceremony; the cantors (who used melodies that were very unfamiliar to me; I wondered if they were singing off-key) sang at different times, sometimes not knowing whose turn it was, and at times leaving the Church (for a coffee-break?) and returning five or ten minutes later; the priest and altar-servers (or were they all priests? or perhaps some deacons?) seemed similarly distracted, though I couldn't always see what they were up to because they were disappearing behind closed doors and at times re-appearing unexpectedly throughout the whole Mass. And then there was the incense, clouds and clouds of incense. And candles. And icons in a style that you wouldn't find even in Italian holy cards. So, it wasn't a good experience. But I said to myself: "Richard, don't judge. This is another culture. Try to enter into the spirit of the thing."

That experience dates back to 1967, and I've been trying ever since. Without success, I confess. Until 12 November 2000.

I was at the Church of the Ascension, the Assumptionist parish in Plovdiv. It was the third day of my visit, and I was concelebrating the Sunday liturgy with our confrère, Fr. Petar Ljubas. It still seemed foreign, but perhaps because it was being well celebrated, perhaps because the assembly seemed attentive, something dawned on me: I had gotten used to thinking of Christianity in exclusively Western terms, and all of a sudden that seemed too "small", too restricted. The reality was greater than that. What the Holy Father has often said came to me in the middle of Mass: the Church has two lungs; we do well to breathe from both. But I had gotten used to breathing just about exclusively with my "Western" (i.e. Cartesian, pragmatic, rationalist) lung. I finally realized that something was missing, and the Eastern tradition just might be able to provide an essential dimension.

The simplicity, rationality, directness of the Western liturgy still appeals to me and probably always will, but while emphasizing certain elements of the faith, that approach tends to downplay others. The liturgy and the conversations I had with our brothers in Bulgaria reminded me that Christians in the East have an acute sense of symbols, of mystery, of the invisible, of the almost tangible presence of the transcendent. The Mass is less a "movement towards", but a "basking in" the presence of the Almighty. And all of this, of course, has consequences for theology, for politics, for art, and even for the way daily life is organized.

I left our brothers in Bulgaria knowing that there was something important there that I could not leave behind. I had gotten used to walking on one leg or breathing with one lung. You can survive with one leg, with one lung; you can learn to compensate; not all is lost. But there are dangers, and my visit had made me more aware of those dangers. In the West, we risk focusing

on the horizontal dimension of our faith and forgetting the vertical element. In the East, the risk might be to neglect the social dimension of the Gospel. Together the picture is fuller and richer.

What are the consequences for the Assumption? One consequence is clear: we need to maintain and build up our presence in places where the Eastern Church is strong. And in those places, we need to be able to celebrate in the Byzantine rite. Why that rite? It is the liturgy that gives flesh to the faith it manifests. *Lex credendi, lex orandi*. Without the liturgy, our awareness risks becoming thin and hollow. The body of the Assumption needs a faith nourished by the oxygen that both lungs provide.

How will it happen? We need to give a good deal of thought to new strategies for pursuing our ecumenical mission. We should continue being present in places where the Orthodox Church is strong. We should continue investing resources in the specialized study of that tradition. But we should also intensify our grass-roots efforts in this regard: multiplying daily contacts with Orthodox clergy and communities, collaborative development projects, joint efforts to enhance the liturgy, dialogue and study projects among clergy and interested lay people, etc.

And who will do all of this? In the Congregation at present, it is the French Province that is principally responsible for our mission in the East. They have made substantial investments in that mission, particularly since the fall of Communism. The religious in those communities are energetic in their efforts to immerse themselves in the languages and cultures where they are located and they are passionate about their mission. But they wonder about their future, about the future of the countries they are in (suffering as they are from great poverty and social injustice), and about the new demands of their mission.

My visit to Bulgaria reminded me again that our life and our mission would be enhanced if alongside our sense of belonging to a Province, we had a deeper awareness of belonging to an international body. Provinces that are young and inexperienced need to know that there are brothers and a wealth of experience that they can turn to. Provinces that are older, often with fewer vocations, can be encouraged to know that the Assumption is thriving and growing in other parts of the world. That struck me as I celebrated the profession of Brothers Edouard and Iosif in Paris on November 18 and saw the great number of young Assumptionists who were on hand to congratulate their two confrères. More specifically, with regard to our mission in the Eastern Church, I believe that this cause must be carried not only by the French Province but by the entire Congregation. For it is the entire body that will suffer if we do not all play our role. This editorial will be my first appeal, but I will try to find other ways. I hope this will spark some flame of passion in our younger brothers especially who might begin to think about how this could take shape in their lives. We would all do well to pray for vocations to this great cause, first of all of

course among the young people of the Eastern Churches.

So much is at stake here. It is a matter of our spiritual health and well-being, a question of allowing ourselves to be open to a fuller, richer way of being. We talk about internationality. This may go even deeper. As Fr. Michel Zabé puts it in a recent slide presentation on the Assumption missions: “Can we live without the East?”

“Put Out Into the Deep”

March 2001

This editorial will be a sneak-preview of part of the report that I will be giving to the Major Superiors when we meet at Arusha at the end of the month of April. The main point I will make to them is one they’ve heard before, but now it is colored by the things that have come to me through the experiences of the past few months.

For one thing, the Jubilee celebrations are over in Rome; you can tell by the smaller crowds in the buses. The Pope concluded the event ritually with the closing of the Sacred Door and an Apostolic Letter that he called “At the beginning of the new millennium” (Novo Millennio Ineunte). I encourage you to read the letter. Then there have been the canonical visits, in Africa and in the Netherlands, with so many good conversations with the brothers there and with their friends and an effort to understand what each of the Provinces were experiencing and what they were being called to. Finally, on a more personal note, there has been the illness of my father and the thoughts and feelings that such an event evokes. All of this fits nicely into our Lenten journey.

What all of these experiences suggests to me is best summed up by the phrase that the Pope uses to conclude his Letter: “Duc in altum!” (Luke 5:4) “Put out into deep water...” You have heard me say it often enough: the call to re-express our charism is nothing less than an invitation to “fall in love again” (a phrase that the Pope also uses in his Letter, par. 33), to grasp and communicate anew our vision as Assumptionists.

We could approach this in very human ways. For example, we might decide what we’d like to do or are good at, then call that our vision. No, it’s a matter of decided what God wants us to do,

then embracing His vision. Or else we might assess our resources, then decide what realistically we're capable of doing. The Gospel talks about this kind of forethought (see Luke 12 and especially 14:28ff), but even by these texts insists on dependence on God.

But if we were to measure our capacity for holiness, how could we possibly make sense of the Gospel injunction to be "holy like your heavenly Father"? If we were to pursue only those tasks that we thought we could succeed at, how could we possibly avoid becoming bored and dispirited? If we were to live our vowed life or love our brothers only to the extent that we were able, could we be surprised that no one would want to join us?

We are new creatures, reborn in the waters of baptism, wholly given over to the following of Christ. Our way is different. We first contemplate the great vision that God has in mind for us, as men and as Assumptionists, then we look for the resources that we need. It becomes a matter of considerable effort and reliance on God, who provides the resources to accomplish what he asks us to do.

Do you see the difference in approach? It strikes me as a radically different approach. It's not the difference of being "realistic" or "idealistic". Isn't it a matter of looking at things from God's point of view?

"With Christ, Nothing Is Impossible"

June 2001

Ken Follett tells an interesting story in his novel, Pillars of the Earth.

One day, along a street in medieval Salisbury, a laborer was pushing a wagon laden with heavy building blocks. A passerby-by helped him nudge the cart up a slight incline and asked him where he was headed. The laborer explained that these were stones for the new cathedral being constructed in the center of town. "And who is the master-builder?" asked the passerby, since he himself was looking for work. The laborer told him it was John of Shaftesbury, but added "it's the bishop who's directing the project and providing all the ideas."

The author comments on the scene: “This was only normal. It would have been very difficult for the bishop to allow the builder do what he wanted. Often, one of the major challenges for the builders was to moderate the imagination of the ecclesiastics, to apply brakes on their building fantasies.”

Nowadays, is it the “ecclesiastics” who have all the imagination when it comes to building new cathedrals?

The Council of Congregation

Well, yes, at the Council of Congregation in Arusha it was the Major Superiors who had all of the imagination, and fortunately no one was needed to moderate their fantasies. They were able to do that as well.

Communion and Collaboration

At Arusha, we thought big and we were able to have dreams about the future. We thought big in the sense that we took as a central theme for all of our work the ideas of “communion and collaboration”. We wanted to think beyond the confines of our regional and Provincial structures and to imagine what communion among all of our religious might mean for the future of our religious family and also in terms of very specific projects.

During our ten days together, a number of small groups met to talk about common projects and how they could be advanced. Working together, we realized that our local limitations seemed less paralyzing. Not only did it inspire new thoughts, it allowed us to imagine new ways of implementing new initiatives. In the dossier included in this issue of our newsletter, you’ll read about some of these in greater detail.

New Missionary Spirit

We thought big, but we also had dreams about the future. The dreams are best summed up in a phrase that Fr. René used toward the end of our meeting. He described what he experienced at the Council as a new missionary spirit (an “*élan missionnaire*”).

For example, we spent a good amount of time talking about the Assumption in Asia. First, about the progress that was being made in our Korean mission. The community was launched anew at a “local Chapter” organized by the new consortium of Provinces (France, South Belgium and

Spain) responsible for the mission and held a year ago in Paris. Now, Joseph, our young Korean brother, is preparing himself for novitiate by studying French in Paris. For example, we spent a good amount of time talking about the Assumption in Asia. First, about the progress that was being made in our Korean mission. The community was launched anew at a “local Chapter” organized by the new consortium of Provinces (France, South Belgium and Spain) responsible for the mission and held a year ago in Paris. Now, Joseph, our young Korean brother, is preparing himself for novitiate by studying French in Paris. In addition to talk about Korea, we were brought up to date about the formation of our young Viet Nam candidates and religious and plans for their future. We also heard about the six young men from the Philippines who will be arriving in Worcester (USA) this month to live in community and continue their discernment in view of novitiate, with the hope of returning eventually to establish the first Assumptionist Philippino foundation in that country. Finally, we even allowed ourselves to dream about Assumptionists in India. Why not think about collaborating with the Religious of the Assumption who have their own Province there?

This missionary spirit was not limited to plans for Asia. We neglected no continent, not out of a desire to be inclusive, but because we sensed that the Assumption was being called from many different directions and that we could imagine responding in many different ways, modestly, in collaboration, but sometimes with a major investment of funds and personnel.

These calls are at times very personal. Allow me to mention just one that I heard during my canonical visitation this year, in Africa. In that Province, our young brothers are very happy to belong to an international Congregation, but they were quick to point out that as they looked around in their own communities, there was no longer much evidence of that international character. Though a few missionaries have remained, so many have returned home. Now some of our senior religious (in Africa, they’re known as “babu”) have accepted to spend time accompanying their brothers in that Province. Wouldn’t there be some younger religious as well who might be drawn to Africa for their own formation? I’m inclined to encourage some of them to make proposals to their Superiors regarding a possible stay in Africa during their years of formation.

You know how often I talk about the importance of being clear about our vision as Assumptionists. At the Council of Congregation, we didn’t talk about vision, but it was vision that drove our discussions and our decisions. Someone said to me recently: “We could do so much if only we had the manpower.” My response was clear: “As lacking as we are in manpower, what would be even worse for the health of our religious family would be to be lacking in vision.” We were not lacking for vision when we met in Arusha last month. Not all of our dreams can or should be realized, but whatever of this is inspired by God will come to pass. And we will succeed in drawing others to join us in bringing this vision about. Like those cathedral-building ecclesiastics of old, why not put our imagination to work? There are plenty of master-builders

who will restrain our creative impulses.

In asking to make final vows, one of our young brothers in the Congo wrote in his self-evaluation: "It's important to dare something big for the good of others; with Christ nothing is impossible." I couldn't agree more.

"Temples for Our Gods"

September 2001

In the early 5th century BC Athens surrendered to its enemies after they had succeeded in destroying the Parthenon, temple of the city's patroness, symbol par excellence of Athenian democracy.

On 11 September, just a few weeks ago, the World Trade Center in New York was demolished and the Pentagon in Washington was severely damaged. Most commentators have drawn our attention to the symbolic character of the targets: two building sites that reflect both the economic power and the military might of the United States.

What are the buildings or the places in your country that symbolize everything for which you stand?

A New York journalist in Time magazine (24 September 2001, p. 80) explains why people from that city were targeted: "We are the bin Ladenites' worst nightmare. We are rich. We swagger. We enjoy ourselves. ...We embody the power and the glory of globalization. We are a profoundly secular city; nowhere else in America are people freer to worship their own gods or to be godless... Blasphemy is common, irreverence is obligatory. Art is at least as important as religion. Eccentric ideas and profane entertainment flourish. Women do just as they please."

Free to worship our own gods or to be godless... No one is godless. No city is without its temples. The World Trade Center had no cross, no crescent, no star of David at its summit. But it was a temple. And how many other cities, in the United States or in your country, aspire to

have exactly the same kind of symbolic temple, a monument to prosperity and material well-being?

Don't get me wrong! This is not a facile criticism of the rich and the well-to-do. There has already been enough of that. But it is a serious question about what is ultimately of greatest importance to us. What is enshrined in our "temples", what do we sacrifice each day to the deities in those buildings? This is also not simply a call to "spiritual values", whatever those might be. Many of us live in pluralist democracies and are grateful for the freedom they make possible, so it is not a question of imposing one religion on everyone, as if that could save the world. But it is a question about the "gods" we worship, i.e. about the ideal of human life that we espouse and for which we are willing to sacrifice everything else. Even as ministers of the Gospel, we at the Assumption need to work hard with all men and women of good will, even those who do not share our faith, to define together the kind of life to which we are willing to commit ourselves and for which we will hold one another responsible. Is a temple to financial success or to military power the place where we as free societies, rich or poor, North or South, want to worship?

P.S. The original editorial that I had drafted for this issue of AA Info, on laity in the Assumption, will appear in the December issue. It did not seem appropriate to overlook the events of 11 September on this page of our bulletin. I also wanted to thank so many of you who wrote letters or sent e-mail messages communicating your sympathy and your prayers for my people during this time of mourning.

"D'Alzon—surfer!"

December 2001

The Surf at Cape Cod

I grew up just forty miles from the Atlantic Ocean. Every summer my family would travel to Cape Cod, where for a week or two we would enjoy wonderful times together and spend hours at the beach. I recall going to the water's edge each day to watch the surfers as they swam on their boards waiting for the next wave. When a good one came along, they would stand and as if in communion with every rise and fall, each twist and turn of the wave, they would dip and bend and lunge forward, riding the wave for all it was worth until it was spent, and then the surfers would slowly drift onto the shore, spent after an exerting but exhilarating adventure. And then they would turn around and swim out to wait for the next wave.

Sometimes they would wait for a long time before a good wave came along. Some days, they would give up and go home, hoping that the next day would be better. Some waves were impossible to manage, and the surfers would crash headlong into the surf. I always wondered by what miracle they could come bobbing back to life on the surface of the water. But their talent amazed me, their ability to take whatever the wave threw in their direction, and not only make the most of it but enjoy it to the full. Is anyone happier than a surfer who has just gracefully ridden a wild wave into the shore?

Surf and grace

In our religious family we've been thinking recently about special graces (kairos moments) and new winds ("un nouveau souffle"). Those surfers and their waves taught me something about grace and the special challenge it presents.

Any surfer knows what it takes to be a good surfer: he must be patient, watch the ocean carefully, respond quickly and courageously when he spots a good wave, then use all of his skill (developed after many hours of training and effort) to ride the wave successfully to shore.

About the only thing a good surfer can't do is make a wave!

The success of our mission doesn't depend on us, and we can't make our religious family grow in size either; those "waves" are given by God. But perhaps we can be more attentive to the waves that God sends our way and learn how to ride them well.

A Grace today?

I do believe that God is still sending waves in our direction. How good are we at noticing them or how skilful are we at riding them once we've seen them? We may be so taken up with what we're used to doing that we haven't noticed that God may be whipping up a storm. I like the prayer that an old pastor once recommended to me. He explained: "I used to ask God to bless what I was doing. Now I ask him to let me do what He is blessing." Maybe we should spend more time and energy riding the waves God sends our way than paddling around the quiet ponds we're used to.

Let me give an example. It's an example inspired by our last Council of Congregation and by a sentence I read recently in the request by one of our young brothers to make perpetual

profession.

Assumption Laity and Religious

This is how the brother put it: "I dream of an Assumptionist community in which we could share with lay people in a more integrated way our life, our charism, our way of seeing things." The Council of Congregation seemed to be inspired by a similar dream when it decided to take the means necessary to promote such integration as much as we possibly could.

I firmly believe that in this dream regarding our lay friends God has sent a great wave in our direction. It is a wave that some "surfers" in the Church have been riding for a while now. The General Council had supper recently with some lay leaders of the Sant' Egidio community here in Rome. This lay community has grown rapidly in the twenty-five years of its existence, insisting very simply on prayer, friendship and work with the poor. No vows, no perpetual commitments, just lay people leading ordinary lives in their apartments, at their jobs, with their families or single, but united by daily prayer together, friendship, and some amount of volunteer service to the poor: the homeless, orphans, the aged, etc.

This "wave" is not a new phenomenon in the Church. For the Assumption, it was there at the beginning, one hundred and fifty years ago. And today, I think the wave is returning, a different wave, perhaps bigger than the original one. Will we have the courage and the skill to ride this wave of growth for our religious family and new inspiration for our mission? It is not a matter of somehow making religious into lay people or vice-versa, or having lay people do the work because there aren't enough of "us". The call is to work with our friends to define the way they would like to be part of the family, respecting the vocation of religious life, but also acknowledging that our lay friends too share in the charism, have their own Assumptionist vocation. The challenge is to imagine ways of "integrating" different kinds of members, religious and lay, into the same Assumption family. Not just working with lay people on a project, whether modest or ambitious. Not just praying occasionally with lay friends. Not just inviting them to a conference or even a series of conferences on our spirit. But thinking of them as real sisters and brothers in the Assumption, of treating them that way, of working with them in planning for the future and even inviting them to join in the organization and animation of our communities.

My prayer

All of that may seem far off. The brother I quoted above spoke of it as a dream. I'm talking about it as a possible wave of growth for our Assumption family. Can we make the dream come true? Will we stand on the shore and watch the surfers enjoy the waves and continue with our routine as if God wasn't at work in the depths of the ocean?

“Ama... et quod vis fac!”

March 2002

A warning before I begin: what I have to say here will require some thought on your part, and you may not agree with what I have to say.

These ideas came to me during the recent meeting held here in Rome for the Directors of the four Assumptionist schools in Belgium and they are presented in a slightly different form in the report that I have just drafted for the upcoming meeting of the Council of the Congregation in April.

They have to do with our mission as Assumptionists and with the apostolic formation that we give to our younger religious. Let me begin with a word about our mission.

Our mission... and our apostolic activities

As we reflected with our collaborators on the educational work of our Belgian Provinces, I understood why d’Alzon saw the educational apostolate as an effective means for realizing the mission of the religious community he was founding. You will find in his closing speech to the members of the Chapter of 1868 a substantial articulation of the mission of the Assumption, what he called “la base sur laquelle repose notre oeuvre”. That discussion constitutes the first part of his speech (ES 130–139). Then in the second part he lists some of the apostolic means for realizing this mission (ES 139–146). The list of means is not arbitrary. It is quite varied (including preaching, education, social work, vocation ministry, etc.), but each means is chosen because it is particularly suited to one or another dimension of the mission that d’Alzon has described in the first part of his talk. D’Alzon defined the Assumption by its mission, not by its apostolic activities, but these are chosen very explicitly in light of the mission. In another broader context, Augustine insisted not on actions, but on the « thought » that directs them and whose expression they are : “ama et quod vis fac”. But that too is a principle often badly understood.

Such an approach is genial, and many of us were attracted to the Assumption because of it. We appreciate such apostolic variety. But it is a very demanding approach. It requires of us a careful and continuing reflection on our mission. And it requires of us a capacity to be discerning

about our choice of apostolic activities so that they will be in keeping with our mission. How faithful are we to this approach?

We live in an age that places a great deal of emphasis on the individual: his preferences, his convictions, his decisions. D'Alzon's emphasis on mission rather than specific apostolic activities could lead us in our context today to emphasize a certain apostolic pluralism in a vacuum: "an Assumptionist is not defined by particular apostolic activities; consequently, we can do anything." What that risks overlooking is d'Alzon's clarity regarding the mission and the considerable thought he gave regarding the apostolic activities most suited to that mission.

Apostolic formation

So what does this mean for the apostolic formation of our younger brothers?

It invites us, on the one hand, to think more critically about the kind of value we attach to the individual and, on the other, to strengthen our sense of a common mission.

St. Paul could help on both questions. Regarding individual apostolic gifts, we find many references in Paul's writings. See for example Romans 12:3–8, I Corinthians 12:12–31, and Ephesians 4:7–16. These texts prompt me to think that an important part of the apostolic formation that we give to young religious should be what we might call gift-discernment. This goes beyond asking our brothers what they would "like to do" once they are engaged full-time in ministry. It goes more deeply and asks what the Spirit would like them to do, what deep desire for ministry the Spirit has implanted in them. Such discernment has little to do with "individual preferences" and yet is deeply respectful of the person. Perhaps it is a way to counter a tendency to individualism that we detect often enough in ourselves, while at the same time valuing the person and what the Spirit has given him as particular gifts. I might add that I think this is a genuinely Augustinian approach inasmuch as Augustine reminds us that "amor meus pondus meum": my deepest desires ("amor") are what motivate me and push me along most insistently ("pondus meum").

Paul places his reflection on personal gifts or charisms clearly in the context of the community, of the body of Christ. An individual's gifts have no meaning unless they are at the service of others (see the famous hymn to love in chapter 13 of Romans). During the years of formation, discernment with our young religious regarding their gifts must be in the context of the community's (i.e. the Province's and the Congregation's) overall mission. But that is possible only if the Province and the Congregation have a clear and substantial mission. We return to the

importance that d'Alzon attached to reflection on mission. Only through such reflection, will individual apostolic gifts find a context within which they can truly bear fruit.

I told you this might be a difficult issue to grapple with. But it is a very important one, and I think touches upon things that are very important to us: respect for the person, genuine apostolic community, clear and substantial identity as a religious family. As we reflect on our charism and as we wonder about the future of religious life in general and of our own Congregation in particular, I think these are some of the questions that should be uppermost in our minds.

I cannot conclude without saying one word about Easter and an upcoming event of major significance. The one word about Easter is simple: may it be a time for ever deepening faith in the one who alone is our source of peace and apostolic fruitfulness. The upcoming event? Sunday, 26 May 2002, in Plovdiv, Bulgaria. I very much hope to see many of you there on that day. A public statement is expected 18 April; on that day, you will hear from me again.

“Signs of the Times”

June 2002

Since the last issue of our news bulletin, we have experienced a few major events at the level of the Congregation. I am thinking in particular of the beatification of our three confreres in Plovdiv on 26 May and of the 34th Council of the Congregation held in Istanbul and Rome from the 4th to the 20th

of April. These events and many others, less happy, occurring in the world around us at this time invite us to a prayerful discernment in order to understand the calls that are being addressed to us.

Plovdiv

I would like to take the opportunity of these few lines to convey some of my own conclusions in this regard, but I would invite each of you in community to do a similar discernment. Many of you were in Plovdiv. But even if you were not, you could profitably gather in community on some

occasion soon to articulate the significance of that event for our life and work.

Two moments in particular keep coming back; I can't help but believe that they have special meaning.

A first moment

The first was the prayer of the Holy Father to conclude the Prayer of the Faithful. This is how I translate it:

Almighty God, you who call us to build the Church, temple of the Holy Spirit, pour into our hearts the words that allow us to be and to feel that we are your sons and daughters, so that we might be enflamed by the fire of a new evangelization and with courage carry into the third millennium the heritage entrusted to us by our forebears.

Passion – new evangelization – courage – imitating the witness of our brother martyrs.

I could not have asked for a better summary of what I think we are called to as a religious family at this time in our history. Perhaps “new evangelization” needs a word of explanation, though it is a theme that I developed in some recent visitation reports.

As Bernard and I walked back to the community in Plovdiv late on Sunday night, we passed in front of the podium where that morning the Pope had beatified our brothers. The Pope and the altar had been replaced by a dozen or so enthusiastic young Bulgarians dancing in beach attire to hard rock music. How is the Church to be present to this world? While we must provide pastoral care for those who continue to participate actively in the life of the Christian community and even help them grow in their involvement and in their knowledge of the faith, we are also called to carry knowledge of Jesus Christ beyond the walls of our church buildings, “out of the sacristy” as Fr. d’Alzon would say, even “beyond the sanctuary” I might add. This is clearly true in the “north” where only small numbers of people consider faith in Jesus Christ relevant to their life, but it is true for every Christian. We are by vocation witnesses of the Gospel, especially where it is poorly known or not known at all. We can be discouraged that so few people come to Church, or we can be “enflamed by the fire of a new evangelization” and bring the Gospel to places where it is not yet to be found.

A second moment

At the end of his homily, the Holy Father made a suggestion that was remarkable for its specificity:

“May the very special devotion with which the new blessed martyrs accompanied candidates for the priesthood be a source of inspiration for you: I exhort the local Church that is in Bulgaria to envisage seriously the possibility of founding a new seminary, in which young men, through a solid human, intellectual and spiritual formation, might prepare themselves for the priesthood for the service of God and their brothers and sisters.”

Knowing that I would be having lunch with the Holy Father, I went to Bulgaria with questions that I might put to him. I wanted to ask him: “Holy Father, the Assumptionists came to Bulgaria because of one of your predecessors. What mission would you entrust to us now?” I hesitated to ask; I would have expected him to say that it was up to us to answer such a question. But before I could even ask at lunch after Mass, was he already giving an answer during his homily?

I was struck by this coincidence. And now I wonder how to respond.

Council of Congregation

This year I was impressed by the amount of suffering in the various regions where our brothers are at work. I could probably name every country where we are located, but there are specific and very painful crises occurring at this very moment in Argentina, Colombia, the Congo, Israel, Madagascar, Russia, Spain, and the United States. At the same time, I was impressed by the poverty within our own ranks: lack of personnel, questions about the future, difficulty in finding leaders and formators, financial problems, etc. Throughout our deliberations, the theme of poverty was never far from our minds.

We also considered from the outset of the meeting the theme of community, at the local, provincial, continental and congregational level. Cardinal Martini’s reflection (of 6 December 2001) on violence in today’s world helped us reflect on the importance of breaking down barriers of culture, tribe, country, and even religion.

The description of the early Christian community in Acts 2 and 4 ended up helping us bring these two themes of poverty and community together. What will the Assumption of the future look like? Poverty and fraternity will be important elements of that picture.

In the coming year, we will be reflecting on apostolic community, the second theme in our consideration of the charism. You will soon receive a copy of my letter on the topic. May the Spirit guide us in our work and lead us to pursue with courage whatever path he would have us follow.

“WHY?”

September 2002

As I write this editorial, the General Council is finishing its long September session. This year's has a particular significance since it is the first meeting at the beginning of the second half of our six-year mandate.

Our desire from the beginning has been to provide leadership that is fraternal and supportive, and at the same time forward-looking and prophetic. Of course, we haven't been able to do everything we would have liked, but we believe we have been energetic in your service: canonical visits, presence in the Provinces, publications, formation sessions, workshops, retreats, financial services, ongoing communication with major superiors and individual religious... More important than the activities in which we have been engaged is the impact that we are having in the Congregation. This is more difficult to measure. We can be happy that we don't often hear complaints, but it would be helpful to have more feedback from you regarding specific things that you've found helpful or others that could have been more beneficial. That would be particularly useful to us now as we plan our priorities for the next three years.

The greatest concern I have for the future of our religious family, even greater now than it was three years ago, is summed up in one word: **WHY?** **Why** did Father d'Alzon found the Assumption? **Why** does God want the Assumption to exist today (if He does)? There was a time when the Assumption did not exist, and there could be a time when it no longer exists. I do not take its existence for granted. It can only exist if God gives it a *raison-d'être*.

Let me recount a recent experience.

After our visit in Istanbul, the Council of Congregation asked the Provincial Council of France and the General Council to meet to discuss the future of our mission “in the East”. We had that long discussion in late August regarding the mission: where should we be, what should we do, how should we do it, where in the world will we find the personnel to do it. I was uneasy about the discussion, because there were so many unanswered questions. But then I realized that I still did not have the answer to the most important question: **why** should the Assumption be “in the East”? what did God have in mind for us there? There may be many reasons for continuing to work in Turkey, in Israël, in Bulgaria, in Romania, in Russia and in Greece (or in any other place, for that matter), but the only essential and decisive reason would be that God had entrusted a mission to us there. If God is calling us to carry out a mission in the East, He will also give us the means and show us the way. As anxious as I was about all of the unanswered questions after our meeting with the Council of the Province of France, I am now very much at peace regarding the future of our presence in this part of the world. That does not mean to say that our presence is assured, but I am more open now to doing whatever it takes to carry out the mission that God gives to us.

How do we decide what that mission is? We listen and pay attention and ask questions. We listen to our religious already engaged in this part of the world, we listen to those in posts of special responsibility (Patriarch Bartholomeos has already spoken his word), we examine the needs, we examine our gifts and resources and desires. All that is part of discernment, and God speaks through those means. And we also need to pray hard, to listen to that still quiet voice that speaks in unexpected ways. It’s not just a matter of analyzing, weighing pros and cons, making strategic decisions. It’s looking at things with a different frame of mind. It’s a matter of discernment, which is a faith-process.

As I wrote above, one of my biggest concerns for our religious family today is that we have not paid enough attention to our purpose, to what it is that God is asking of us today. It’s not enough to continue to do what we did yesterday. It’s not enough to do what we’re good at doing. It’s not enough to respond to needs that a sociological analysis has revealed to us. The only reason for being and acting each day that will sustain us in difficult times and that will make us convincing in today’s world is a God-given mission.

Don’t take it for granted that what you’re doing is a God-given mission. Call me a cynic, but I’m inclined to think you should take it for granted that you’ve lost a sense of what God wants of you. It’s what happens after a religious family has been in existence for as long as we have. (I’ve visited enough beautiful abandoned monasteries to know what happens in the life-cycle of religious Orders.) It’s what happens in a culture that easily enough tends to give the priority to rational analysis rather than to inspiration that comes in prayer. It’s what happens to religious families that have become so small and poor that they are afraid to take risks and strike out in new directions: “After all, we don’t have the man-power and we need to be realistic about

retirement and health-care.”

It all comes down to asking that most fundamental of questions: **why?** It’s a question of meaning and purpose. As he pondered the question of diminishing vocations in religious life, a Jesuit wrote not long ago: “When young people see that religious are responding to a real need in the world today, then they will come.” In other words, when young people see that religious have a purpose, a passion, a great cause, then they will come. But they will steer clear of any way of life that imposes great demands, like a lack of intimate companionship or the ability to decide important matters for oneself, when it’s simply in view of doing a job to earn one’s living and keeping oneself busy.

“And peace to men of good will...”

December 2002

The Sant’ Egidio community in Rome organized a march for 1 January that made its way from the center of town to St. Peter’s square. There the crowd greeted the Pope and expressed support for his continued efforts in encouraging world leaders and men and women everywhere to spare no efforts to establish peace in the world.

In effect, John Paul II just recently (8th December) published a message on the topic on the occasion of the World Day of Peace (1 January 2003). The relatively short document (which you can find in various languages at www.vatican.va) recalls some of the most important thoughts of Pope John XXIII in his encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, of 1963.

The Pope’s encyclical, published just a few months before his death, situates peace in the context of truth and the order established by God (what Fr. d’Alzon might have called “the rights of God”): “Peace on earth, which all men of every era have most eagerly yearned for, can be firmly established and sustained only if the order laid down by God be dutifully observed.” Unless we seek to know the truth about God and about what is truly best for humanity, peace can only be an uneasy truce and at best only a temporary and passing condition.

John XXIII suggested that in today’s world the common good needs to be understood in global

terms and that a public international authority is needed to serve the cause of human rights, of freedom and of peace. John Paul comments that following upon the encyclical's insistence on certain rights many newer rights have been proclaimed, but some of the basic ones have been neglected: the right to food, to water fit for drinking, to housing, to self-determination, and to independence. And in addition to such rights, we cannot forget to insist on the duties that flow from them. Such duties "establish the limits within which rights must be contained in order not to become an exercise in arbitrariness. A greater awareness of universal human duties would greatly benefit the cause of peace, setting it on the moral basis of a shared recognition of an order in things which is not dependent on the will of any individual or group." (par. 5)

A genuine concern for peace obliges us to pose two important questions: in the face of war and violence, what kind of order could replace such chaos, to permit humanity to live in freedom, peace and security? And in the context of efforts in the world at organizing in different sectors (cultural, economic and political), what principles should guide the development of these new forms of world order? No such efforts at organization can be separated from questions of human dignity and human rights understood in the way that our current Pope suggests.

The Holy Father's message for this year's World Day of Peace, here briefly summarized, might help us confront some of the questions we are asking ourselves this Christmas, a season we usually associate with peace. The Season of Peace. And we are preparing for yet another war, this time in Iraq! The contrast could not be more jarring. The violence that threatens is a source of profound consternation to all those of good will, to whom the message of the birth of Christ has been revealed.

What does His message of peace mean in a world where we are capable of unleashing the destruction and hatred of war? To put it negatively, it means that a Christian can never say no to peace. "Pope John XXIII did not agree with those who claimed that peace was impossible." (paragraph 3 of the Pope's message) A Christian must believe that reconciliation and communion among human beings and among nations is a supreme good and that it can be achieved. No matter how difficult. Because the Prince of Peace was born into this world. Because He gave His life for the sake of reconciliation and communion and spoke the last word in victory. I used to think that Paul VI was naïve when in 1965 at the United Nations he pleaded with the leaders of the world: "War, war, never again war!" He was praying that we would acknowledge the active presence in the world of the one who makes peace possible.

What does it mean to say that a Christian is a man or a woman of peace? How can we respond to this gift of peace?

First in prayer. May this be a season of fervent prayer, of insistent prayer, of intense pleading that the leaders of enemy countries might speak with each other and hear a word of reconciliation. A time of prayer too for those we think of as enemies.

And then in an effort to know better the faces and the lives of the men, the women and the children in those places we think of as foreign or inimical to our way of life, to know their aspirations and their suffering. It is easier to wage war on an abstraction than on the concrete human being like yourself standing before you.

We would also do well to read and reflect and talk with others about the issues. They are complex, and we need to approach them with modesty and a desire to understand differing points of view. Only an enlightened mind can combat prejudice and sift through conflicting sentiments.

Finally, we might engage in whatever action that will help us to deepen our attachment to the mission of peace and reconciliation for which God became in Christ, who surrendered his life for the sake of uniting all men. Andrea Riccardi, founder of the lay community of Sant' Egidio, spoke in Rome recently about the efforts of his community to broker a peace in Mozambique, ten years ago, which resulted in a settlement that has lasted to this day. The community has continued to work in the country, most recently in an effort to fight AIDS and its devastating effect on the people there. It is impressive to see the determination and intelligence with the very ordinary people of the Sant' Egidio community were able to foster peace in a region that had known only war for decades. What can we do for the cause of peace?

God's blessings on you all this Christmas season.

“Be attentive, dear friends!”

March 2003

There was once an elephant and a hen who were the best of friends. They saw each other every day and spent long hours in conversation, sometimes talking about serious things, at

other times about things of little consequence, and on occasion keeping silence together. They just enjoyed being together. They would do anything for each other.

One day, while sitting on a recently laid egg to keep it warm, the hen was talking with the elephant as they often did. They wondered about the days ahead and the little chick that was about to be hatched. But then the hen recalled that if she didn't go to the market, there would be nothing with which to feed the chick when it finally broke through its shell. She excused herself and ran off to find a few seeds, leaving the egg and the elephant behind.

The elephant sat there, keeping the egg company, waiting patiently for his friend to return. But she was slow in coming back. The elephant sat in silence, repeatedly glancing at the egg, realizing that as time passed, the egg was getting colder and colder. She glanced at the egg again. She began to worry, about her absent friend, but also about the dropping temperature as the sun went down and about the poor egg getting colder by the minute. The elephant thought how clever the hen was, keeping the egg warm by sitting on it. Wasn't nature wonderful! Such an easy solution. Well, who said an elephant wasn't smart? "And I care so much for my friend, the hen!"

So, with great effort the elephant struggled to its feet, nudged closer to the egg, looked down with great affection, and proceeded to place its great posterior directly on top of the egg.

We know the rest of this sad story.

"Be attentive, dear friends!" To be precise, when St. Augustine addresses the Christians in his community at Hippo, he usually calls them "Your holiness" or "Your Charity". In his fifth and sixth sermons, commenting on Saint John's first letter, Augustine struggles to clarify a difficult point that is not unrelated to my story about the elephant and the hen. Repeatedly, he urges the Christian community: "Be attentive, Your Charity." (*Intendat Caritas Vestra.*) (V,6) In fact, in these two sermons, Augustine tries to explain to his brothers and sisters that their charity must be attentive. He urges them time and again to examine their conscience ("*Revochemur ergo ad conscientiam.*" "Let us hearken back to our conscience." VI,2), to look within ("*Intus vide.*" "Look within" VI,3), to question their heart ("*Interroga cor tuum*" VI,3) to see what it is that their charity intends to do. So many acts can seem to be loving when in fact they are just the opposite. So many acts can seem harsh when in fact they are the most loving. Acts are important because they show (to others and to ourselves) that we mean what we say with our words, but what makes the act loving is the charity in the heart that inspires it. Augustine quotes St. John (I John

3:18): “Children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth.” “Petits enfants, n’aimons pas seulement de mots ni de langue, mais en actes et en vérité.” Love cannot be separated from truth. It must be intentional, and it must seek to do what is genuinely good for the one we say we love.

I recall all of this because this year as a religious family we are focusing our attention on the second of three essential elements of our Assumptionist identity: our life in apostolic community. Augustine urges us in community to be attentive, to be thoughtful in the charity that we show to one another. You understand Augustine if you sense that love is not easy: it is not the automatic outpouring of a friendly feeling we might have toward another. It is the expression of the heart’s movement, inspired as much if not more by one’s reason as by one’s sentiment. This is not to say that Augustine is overly “spiritual” or “rational” in his approach to love. In fact, it would be hard to find a man more passionate in his friendships and in his love affairs.

But it is to say that there is a fragile side to love; it must be cared for with all of our human capacities. It is something to be built up, with our will and with our intelligence. When Fr. d’Alzon talks to his brothers about their work, he tells them that their efforts will be fruitful to the extent that they are intelligent. Love in a thoughtful way. “Be attentive, dear friends!”

I’ve written the above words before the outbreak of war in Iraq on the morning of 20th March. I am reminded of what the former archbishop of Milan, Cardinal Martini, wrote in the *Osservatore Romano* just a week before (on 12

th

March) about peace: “Peace is never a solid structure, compactly built once and for all. Rather it resembles more a tent, a castle in the sand, to be cared for and rebuilt continuously with infinite patience.” (“La pace non è mai un edificio solido, costruito compatto una volta per tutte, ma somiglia piuttosto ad una tenda, ad un castello di sabbia, da custodire e da ricostruire sempre con infinita pazienza.”) And, I would add, with infinite attention and intelligence. May we continue to plead for peace in prayer with as much strength as possible and to pay the price willingly each day to establish peace wherever we are.

“The Church’s ‘Project’ ”

June 2003

The minutes for this year’s Council of Congregation meeting, as good as they are, will probably

not record the little symbolic gesture with which we concluded our work. At the end of Mass I gave to each of the Council participants a small votive candle and a copy in his own language of *Novo millennio ineunte*, Pope John Paul's apostolic letter closing the Jubilee Year.

The candle was a visual reminder that each member of the Council had a mission, I would even say a responsibility, to share the light he had received during almost two weeks of work together, to convey and even to defend if necessary the decisions that we took as a leadership community for the Congregation.

The Pope's apostolic letter, as you are probably already aware, is a favorite of mine. This year I drew attention to it in the context of the Council's decision that the Chapter of 2005 would devote a good part of its energy to the elaboration of a "projet" [\[1\]](#) for the entire Congregation. *Novo millennio ineunte* is the "projet" that the Pope proposed for the entire Church (see his explanation especially par. 29). In this "projet" he reviews some of the events of the Jubilee Year (part 1); he reminds us of what is central in our faith, our Christian "vision" so to speak, viz. the face of Christ to be contemplated (part 2); and then suggests a dozen or so pastoral orientations that the Church would do well to pursue (parts 3 and 4). Although no part of the letter is explicitly set aside for the purpose of analyzing the "state of the world and the Church", the Pope makes many references (especially in parts 3 and 4) to the challenges and needs of our time. His perspective is not sociological or political; he assesses the needs from the point of view of faith, with an understanding at some depth of what will genuinely promote human dignity. [\[2\]](#)

If the Pope thought it important to propose such a "projet" for the entire Church [\[3\]](#), how much more so must we within the Congregation.

In his recent request to make final vows, one of our younger brothers said that his vow of obedience "consisted in being faithful to the project of the community." He is absolutely right in placing the vow of obedience in this context. If the project of the community is vague or even worse non-existent, then in the name of what can the Superior call us to obedience? In the name of what can someone be truly "sent"?

For three days before the Council of Congregation, the Provincials, their Assistants, and the General Council talked together about leadership. We talked about responsibility, the responsibility that every member bears for the common good of the community to which he belongs. And specifically we talked about the responsibility of the leader within the community.

His principal task is to cast a vision, to gather and form a team of collaborators, and to articulate as clearly as possible the plan for realizing the vision and mission. In other words, most of all he needs to care for the “projet” of his community.

Letter #6 has already alerted you to the work that the Chapter of 2005 will do with regard to the “projet” of the Congregation. It will be hard work. We will be tempted to say something that sounds nice, but that calls us to nothing. We will be tempted to defend what we are doing, but that fails to deepen our apostolic ambition. We will be tempted to measure the task against our human means, instead of allowing ourselves to be challenged by God’s great causes. It is not just a matter of a new program or a better organization; it has to do with the meaning of obedience and mission. It has to do with our *raison d’être*. There is much to be done. And soon each of you will be invited to begin, with the publication of Letter #7, on the third element of our charism: the mission in view of the Kingdom. May the Spirit that we celebrate today accompany us in our work.

APPENDIX

A DEFINITION OF “PROJET”

The Council of Congregation 2003 has decided that one of the tasks of the General Chapter of 2005 will be to elaborate a “projet” for the Congregation. The term can be defined in different ways. We agree to the following definition.

A Congregation “projet” includes two elements:

a statement of the mission or principal apostolic objectives of the Congregation;

a statement of the major means to be used in realizing these apostolic objectives.

Such a “projet” presupposes that the Congregation has articulated its overall **vision**. The vision is the dream that we have for the future. In a religious context, it is the purpose that God has given to the Congregation. It is what inspires and motivates us even if it is a dream that could hardly be realized in anyone’s lifetime. The mission or principal apostolic objectives of the Congregation are that part of the dream that we can reasonably expect to realize. In preparing a this project we might do well simply to re-appropriate the vision that Father d’Alzon articulated in his closing address to the General Chapter of 1868.

In that address, Father d'Alzon proposed a "projet" for the Congregation to the assembled capitulants. It included:

a statement of the vision of the Assumption:

Our spiritual life, our religious substance, our raison d'être as Augustinians of the Assumption, is to be found in our motto, « Thy Kingdom Come »... (thus) you will know in its briefest expression the spirit of the Assumption. (Closing Address to the General Chapter of 1868; ES 130–131);

a statement of the mission or principal apostolic, spiritual and theological objectives of the Congregation (ES 131–139);

a statement of the major means to be used in realizing these objectives (ES 139–146).

N.B. The project of Fr. d'Alzon is NOT simply or even primarily a description of the activities in which Fr. d'Alzon or his confreres were engaged. Rather, with his "projet" he wanted to orient the Congregation for the future, proposing the objectives to be pursued and the means to be used with whatever resources might be available.

Our Congregation's "projet" likewise should not simply be a description of what we are currently doing (that is what we might call an "umbrella project"). With an idea of who we are (i.e. Assumptionists) and the needs that we discern, we should draft a "projet" that will orient us in making choices for the future. This does not stop us from respecting those particular charisms of brothers who may not easily fit into such a "projet", but it does allow us to move forward together as a unified religious family and to orient brothers (i.e. confer a mission) and allocate resources when we are called to do so and are able to respond.

"The Beauty of Our Being"

September 2003

Summers are quiet times when nothing happens. Except that this summer there was a

gathering of 400 people at Valpré for the Université d'été, an international formation community living in Nîmes for two months (the CAFI), and the episcopal ordination of one of our confreres in Brazil on August 16. And that's the short list. None of these were ordinary events, and I'm tempted to write about all of them, but let me focus on yet another event, in conjunction with Fr. José Geraldo's ordination in Brazil.

During that brief visit, on 18 August in São Paulo, I had the privilege of meeting with Claudio PASTRO, who designed José's coat of arms. In the field of sacred art, he is surely the best known artist in Brazil. He has also worked in Argentina, Germany, Belgium, Italy and Portugal. I had seen some of his art during a previous visit to Brazil: some chapels, sculptures, and paintings in Brasilia; a church in São Paulo; the beginnings of a project at the national Basilica of the Aparecida.

I was eager to meet with the artist in order to ask him to provide us with a design for the renewal of the chapel at the General House, which has not been substantially adapted since we moved here in the 1950s. When I arrived, however, I learned that Claudio had been hospitalized and was slowly and painfully recuperating from a liver transplant. Despite this, he insisted that our meeting take place.

What I encountered was the powerful witness of a man of faith, an artist at the service of the Gospel, and a lover of the Assumption.

In fact, Claudio had been a student with our confreres at Espírito Santo do Pinhal. He was eager for our meeting because of the great affection he has for the Assumption and for all of the religious who influenced him deeply when he was young. He remembered a number of them by name: one who wrote plays and had him paint the scenery, another one remarkable for his holiness, a third who taught him rigorous thinking in mathematics.

The Assumptionist influence was deep. He talked, for example, about his vocation as an artist and his desire to draw from the best in our Catholic artistic heritage while speaking in a modern language. That is similar to d'Alzon's approach. Such an ambition, Claudio added, is not always understood: one is criticized by both the conservatives and the liberals. He also spoke about his own faith journey. He explained that he had been a member of a Church movement for four years, but that he eventually distanced himself from the group because the members talked more about the founder than about Jesus Christ. Dialogue and openness to the other, he said, is at the heart of our calling to love our neighbor, and he sensed that the movement was too

closed in on itself. Didn't d'Alzon urge us to prefer the main nave of the Church over the side chapels?

I also have vivid memories of the descriptions Claudio gave of some of his projects and understood that these were the expressions of deeply held convictions and his attempts to serve the Gospel and God's people. Art has not just been an enjoyable occupation or a way to make a living, but something to which he has given his life. A divine calling elicits that kind of passion and commitment.

We did talk business for a few minutes at the end of our conversation. Claudio is more than happy to do whatever he can for our project in Rome. He also promised to continue helping us with our logo design, for which he has already prepared eight sketches. The reasons for Claudio's enthusiasm about our Rome project seem simple enough: he loves Italy, and he loves the Assumption. There will be time for us to talk more about this project as his health improves.

I wanted to write to you about this encounter because, at the risk of offending Claudio's modesty, I sensed that I was talking with someone important for today's Church and in particular for the Church of Brazil. But especially because this was a person whose impact on God's people is through art. As I left the hospital after my meeting, I was thinking of so many Assumptionists, many of them (though hardly all) among our young brothers today, who are artists: musicians, painters, architects, sculptors, composers, poets, playwrights, novelists. I was especially grateful for their talent, for the effort they invest in their artistic work, and for the joy they bring us.

Artists are not always easy people: they are passionately attentive to a voice that most of us cannot hear. But when they succeed in hearing what that voice is saying and communicating something of their experience to the rest of us, we are charmed and enlightened. Beauty is what makes us fall in love, and our artists are playing a special role in that regard in our midst. In one of the concluding messages at the end of the second Vatican Council, we heard that artists are the ones who make "the invisible world palpable... This world in which we live needs beauty in order not to sink into despair. It is beauty, like truth, which brings joy to the heart of man. Remember that you are the guardians of beauty in the world."

Of course, I hope that this meeting with Claudio Pastro will lead to the renovation of our chapel in Rome according to his design. But I also take it as an opportunity to thank all of our confrère artists for the mission they carry out in the Church and in our midst and to encourage them to

continue serving in this special capacity. I conclude with words that Claudio wrote for me, but that I think he intended for the Assumption:

In the infinite and profound beauty of our being, contemplating the One who lives in us, Jesus, I am gratefully yours, C. Pastro

“The Mission for the Kingdom”

“The grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all.” (Letter to Titus 2:11)

December 2003

These words from the second reading of the Christmas Vigil Mass remind us that the mystery of God-with-us is a beacon of hope for all of mankind. That hope and the peace it makes possible are good news for us that we can't keep from sharing.

As I write these words, we are preparing to send to each of you a copy of Letter #7, which I have entitled “ ‘Come See This Man’—The Mission for the Kingdom”. It is a long reflection on the third element of our Assumptionist charism.

We have never ceased to reflect on this essential dimension of our vocation, but that reflection was given a special impetus in Lyons, in November of the year 2000, when we gathered for a special symposium on “The Missionary Adventure”, a history and analysis of the Congregation's various missions since the founding in 1850. Just a few weeks ago (November 2003), another element was added to that reflection with the colloquium on “The Assumptionists and Russia 1903–2003”, held here in Rome. The August 2000 Declaration, Dominus Jesus (on the unicity and salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the Church), of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and recent accusations by the Orthodox Church in Russia of the proselytizing agenda of the Catholic Church in that country oblige us to ask ourselves how we are to understand this call to mission, which is a necessary part of what it means to be Christian.

However we understand it, it is clear that in the Church and in the Congregation there is a new awareness of mission. These days in Spain (end of December), our brothers are meeting in

Provincial Assembly to think about the mission toward those who are alienated from the Church. We seem more aware that a church is not only meant to serve its attending parishioners, but that it is a community at the service of the entire neighborhood. Christoph Schönborn, the Cardinal of Vienna, develops this thought in a book recently published in French (*Le défi du christianisme*, 2003):

Today we are at a turning point. It is time to leave our protected circles and to revive together the great missionary adventure. In Vienna, we have just initiated a mission project that may seem a little foolish, but its purpose is to rediscover this dimension of the apostolate. All of us, laity and priests, are invited to leave our parishes, to go out to meet those who never cross the threshold of a church. It's a question of being witnesses to the Gospel wherever we find ourselves. This is a reform that the Church should undertake regularly. It requires theological and liturgical shifts. It will require us to find liturgies that are less centered on the community as such, to avoid being a community trapped in a celebration of itself. When we are gathered in community, there are two dimensions of liturgy that we must always seek to respect: the vertical dimension, the orientation of worship directed to God, the celebration of Christ the Savior, and then the missionary dimension: "Go out to all the world." Nourished by the Word of God and by the Eucharist, we are sent by Christ to our brothers to help them discover and share the treasure of our faith.

With regard to theology, we are passing from the time when practically everything was put in question. And we are now in a period when we express our Christian identity with greater serenity and assurance, making possible a new apostolic élan, with the conviction that we are gifts that we have received. (pp. 20–21)

The canonical visits we have been doing in every Province have acquainted us with our various evangelizing efforts. In so many parishes, we have seen dramatically dwindling numbers and the almost total absence of certain groups, like the young. In some Provinces, still lively congregations fill our churches, but the signs of disaffection can't be denied. Some of our African brothers requesting priestly ordination note the impact that sects and even secularization are having on their Catholic populations. The former Archbishop of Quebec, whom I have quoted before, felt he could no longer justify focusing most of the Church's effort on just a small part of the city's population. "The grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all."

We have received a gift: it is the truth about God, a truth of love. The early Christian community in the Acts of the Apostles lived this truth intensely, and so attracted others to join the community. We cannot help but act out of this love. We cannot help but speak about its

source. Like any other love, we will communicate it with passion, but with respect and a genuine desire for the good of those we encounter.

One of our gifts this Christmas could be a renewed understanding of mission and a deepening passion for God's reign in the world. May our prayer for the Congregation during this season be for this gift.

“Love for the Assumption”

March 2004

Father Wilfrid Dufault, our fifth Superior General, died on February 24th, the seventieth anniversary of his priestly ordination, as if to draw attention to the central place of ministry in his life. Up to the end, already 96 years old, Fr. Wilfrid was planning a Gospel reflection bulletin for the residents at St. Francis Home, where he spent his last months. It is hard to imagine a man more impassioned for the Kingdom.

Father Wilfrid loved the Assumption and Fr. d'Alzon. When I told him our three Bulgarian martyrs were to be beatified, he was overjoyed. And then he added: “But...” I was afraid to heard what was to follow. “But... shouldn't the founder be beatified before the disciples?”

It was such reverence for our founders and foundresses and such a love for our religious family that gathered over a hundred sisters and brothers together in Paris, from January 6th to the 10th to look back at our common story, especially those moments of crisis that have left memories that still need healing. The purpose of our gathering was not simply academic. During the Jubilee Year 2000, when we began organizing this meeting, Pope John Paul was inviting the entire Church to work at reconciliation and communion. This Colloquium was our way of responding: our purpose was to foster deepen unity within our Assumption family.

I can say with some confidence that at the end of the Colloquium we were all pleased with the results. You will be able to read what was said, both in formal presentations and in the dialogue that followed, when the Acts of the Colloquium are published (at the end of this calendar year). The wonderful celebration organized by the Orantes sisters at the General House of the Sisters of the Assumption on the 10th of January, to mark the centenary of the death of Fr. Picard,

summed up the spirit that had been generated during our four days of study and discussion.

My concern then and now, perhaps intensified since Fr. Wilfrid's death, is how to draw the fruits of all of that work for our life and mission in the future. I am asking the question also in the light of our preoccupation since our last General Chapter with the charism of our religious family.

Let me make a suggestion. I'd like to know what you think.

It's a suggestion inspired by a project that Fr. Claude Maréchal had worked on at the end of his second term and one that we have returned to repeatedly in our own work in the General Council.

Why not organize a group of Assumption brothers and sisters who would meet at least annually for the purpose of studying our individual charisms and our common spiritual heritage? These religious would have some very concrete goals: to continue their own formation in the charism by means of common study projects and to be available to all of our communities and Provinces in the world for the animation of sessions and retreats that focus on the charism.

If such a group is to be practical, its functioning needs to be simple. I would imagine the membership to be international and made up of those brothers and sisters who have some understanding of the charism and the thought of our founders and a desire to learn more. It would be good that among them there would be a good number who have experience teaching others about the charism and animating retreats dealing with the charism. Membership could be somewhat flexible (though a certain regularity would be desirable) and probably should not exceed twenty religious.

The group could meet once a year, with a precise program of study and reflection. The program could be determined at the end of the meeting for the following year.

In addition to providing our family with a number of competent and enthusiastic session and retreat animators, this group would also be a good training ground for future historians and archivists for our Congregations.

I will bring this idea to a meeting of the Superiors General on March 26th, but meanwhile I would ask you to think about it in each our vice/Provinces: how does the idea strike you in general, what kinds of topics should be studied, would you be interested in bring part of such a group? The General Council will continue to think about the idea and see if and how it should be pursued.

Even if such a project proves to be unrealizable, the objective remains the same: to become more familiar with our charism by study and dialogue, to expose ourselves to the clear and healing light of truth, to find ways to share the treasure we have received from our founders for the good of God's people.

I hope the graces of Lent will be abundant for you all, and that your Easter celebrations renew in you the peace and hope that Jesus's rising makes possible.

“The Assumption, Chapter-bound”

June 2004

“Many Gifts in one Body” – That is the theme set by the Council of Congregation 2003 for our next General Chapter. Since then we have been Chapter-bound. That is even more the case as a result of the work done by the members of the Council of Congregation 2004, in Cuernavaca (Mexico) and Wareham (USA) just a few weeks ago. In the dossier of this issue of AA News, you can read about some of the decisions we took that will help to shape the upcoming Chapter. Some of you have already been asked for a specific contribution. On the feast of Pentecost I signed the “Letter of Indiction” for the Chapter, which you should soon receive. In it I ask every one of you to assume your own responsibility for the success of our work next May.

We're tempted either to downplay the importance of Chapters (“What difference do they really make?”) or exaggerate their significance (“This one is really key to our survival; it's now or never!”). It's clear to me that a Chapter is a grace, no more and no less. It is a *kairos*, a potentially life-giving moment in the life of a community. It is not our effort that will produce (or fail to produce) the results; focusing too much on the efforts will guarantee disappointment.

The questions should rather be: What grace do we need? What grace is the Spirit offering? The Spirit is always faithful and generous. Will we be there to receive the gift?

I invite all of you, individuals and communities, with our sisters and lay friends, to begin now to open yourselves to the gift being prepared. We are as of now Chapter-bound. How will we prepare concretely, in personal and common practices? I leave that up to your creativity. My one suggestion is that at least once a week, you take the series of prayer intentions that follow these brief words as your community's prayer. These intentions were composed by the members of the General Council. We hope they will help you in your prayer.

May the Spirit accompany us in our journey toward May 1, 2005.

“Religious Formation”

September, 2004

“Today, my mother died. Or maybe it was yesterday, I don't know?” (« Aujourd'hui, maman est morte. Ou peut-être hier, je ne sais pas. ») There are opening lines from novels that you never forget. Do you know who wrote those opening lines?

I remember reading that novel as if it were yesterday, though in fact I read it in 1962. It was one of many novels and plays we read in a course on 20th century French literature, given by the best teacher I ever had, Fr. Denys Gonthier, a.a. We worked hard in that course (André Malraux' French is not easy) and often complained to the professor: “Why do we have to struggle through such difficult books? In any event, why bother reading all this literature?”

Another one of the memorable novels we read was by Julian Green, the French/American novelist, who died just recently. It's entitled *Moïra*, the story of a young man's love adventures at the University of Virginia. We twenty-year old university students had no difficulty understanding the relevance of that story!

Father Denys, a lover of French and Spanish literature and a specialist in Cervantes, would tell

us now and then that literature was a prelude to philosophy. What would inexperienced young men have to think about when they studied philosophy unless they had somehow acquired a variety of experiences, at least vicariously, through the lives of the men and women they encountered in literature? Meursault's experiences in Camus' *L'Étranger*; Odysseus' in Homer's epic poem, Macbeth in Shakespeare's play, Monsieur Jourdain in *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*—so many experiences that most people, let alone the young, never have. But without those experiences, acquired albeit indirectly, how poor we would be, how little we would have to think about, how few companions and insights we would have on our own journey.

At the Council of Congregation recently, we talked at length about the kind of formation we should provide for young religious today. We didn't say clearly enough that young religious should have read Camus and Gide and Bernanos and Percy and Homer and Sophocles and Racine and Shakespeare and Dante and Cervantes (add your own favorite great writers, from your own culture). A religious who has not lived through the women and men that he can find in great literature has an anemic soul. Dealing with life, let alone religious life, is not easy—but doing it in the company of Huckleberry Finn at least makes it more interesting and might even provide the light and strength you need to face life's challenges.

A good religious formation begins with a solid human formation: a good family experience, some solid loving relationships, an education that forms us to rigorous thinking and expression, that introduces us to the wonders and mystery of nature, that acquaints us with human success and failure in history, and that expands and refines our hearts and minds through the experiences of men and women we meet in great works of literature.

What will the Psalms mean to someone who has never thrilled at the reading of a poem? Doesn't reading *Romeo and Juliet* influence the way a celibate lives the consecrated life? Will a priest minister in the same way after having reflected on Camus' portrait of Abbé Paneloux in *La Peste*?

Will all of our "spiritual formation" grab hold if our human experience, actual and vicarious, remains thin?

These are important questions to consider as we prepare the General Chapter's discussion of formation in the Congregation. They are also important in the context of our reflection on vocation ministry and the future of religious life. Finally, they are important questions as we think about our mission in education and communication.

“Why bother reading literature?” You might as well ask: why bother caring for one’s humanity?

“Taming Diversity”

December 2004

You can guess from my last editorial that I learned a great deal from the Assumptionist professor who taught us French literature in the 60s at Assumption College. After struggling through André Malraux’ *La Condition humaine*, I complained to Fr. Denys: “I would understand this book so much better if I could read it in my own language!” “I wouldn’t be so sure,” replied Fr. Denys. I probably should have been offended by this not so subtle negative assessment of my intellectual abilities, but for the fact that the remark got me to do some serious thinking. I decided to take up Fr. Denys’ challenge, and in a course of English literature, I began a thorough study of the English novelist, John Galsworthy. At least his novels were written in my own language! After a few months, I wrote a long essay and shared a copy of it with Fr. Denys. We spent many hours talking about my work and about John Galsworthy. Guess what I discovered? Well, I have to admit that despite my familiarity with Galsworthy’s language and culture, I understood him no better than I had understood the French novelist!

This experience was the beginning of my reflection on a theme, which we recently chose for our General Chapter: unity in diversity. I learned just how diverse two novelists could be. This had to do with the fact that they were writing in different languages, in different countries, with different cultural backgrounds. I remember thinking about what made an English writer “English” and what made a French writer “French”. Was it in the characters they chose or the situations they described or the themes that they explored?

But I must honestly say that what struck me most in this experience was my inability to understand either author, whether “foreign” (Malraux) or familiar (Galsworthy). It was not the “foreignness” of one that made him impenetrable, and it was not the “familiarity” of the other that made him comprehensible. They were both difficult to understand! And I had assumed that familiarity would facilitate my task... and that “foreignness” made it so much more difficult. Deep down, I probably assumed that the familiar was friendly, and the “foreign” was alien.

The conclusion forced itself upon me: it’s not language or culture that facilitates or stands in the

way of understanding. It's not because another person speaks a different language that I have a hard time understanding him. It's not because I feel comfortable in my own culture that I truly understand it. Although the diversity of these two authors intrigued me, in the end it wasn't this diversity that presented the greatest challenge to my understanding.

So, what is it that makes communication and understanding so difficult?

The real challenge to our understanding is, in the end, the depth and complexity of the mystery of the human person. And the human person is the sum of his choices and actions in freedom in the face of truth, in the face of God. He cannot be defined primarily by his language or his color or his history, even if these have a very deep impact on the choices he makes.

We are preparing for a General Chapter that will try to foster a deeper unity in our religious family, as well as a greater appreciation and genuine respect for the variety of all of its parts. My experience with Malraux and Galsworthy forced me to focus not on difference but on the mystery of the human condition that is the common concern of all novelists because they are human beings. I think that was an important lesson to learn early in life. It leads me today to want to insist on the great wealth of forms (what the English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins called the "pied beauty" of creation) by which this mystery reveals itself, but in doing so I cannot lose sight of the fact that it is the same life, the same Creator and Lord that "flames out" from all of this great diversity.

“A Brief ‘Testimony’ ”

March 2005

[This is one of six "testimonies" by the Superior General and the members of the General Council, on the eve of the General Chapter.]

Six years ago, the Congregation entrusted to me and to four confrères the animation of our religious family. Like any life or mission, this period has been marked by its enjoyable moments, as well as by times of doubt, of disappointment, and of suffering. What sheds most light on our life and work together during these years was the thought that came to me just moments before my election on 11 May 1999. Sensing that this was a possibility, I was in chapel and had just

begun praying Office of Readings (Tuesday, Week II). The antiphon to the first psalm seemed directed to me: "Surrender to God, and he will do everything for you." With the assurance provided by that antiphon, I have found during these years that the sufferings and even the joys had meaning beyond themselves. The extraordinary sympathy and openness of so many in every Province made the time spent at your service a heart-warming experience. The diversity and depth of many of these experiences have taught me a great deal. Whatever the quality of what we have been able to accomplish, I believe that for me this has been a time of grace for which I am most grateful. I hope it has been of some use to you, my brothers in the Assumption.

"Values in a Time of Upheaval"

September 2005

After busy weeks before and during our General Chapter and after working with our brothers in Spain and then with the Little Sisters and the Oblate Sisters at their General Chapters, I was happy to spend the month of August almost entirely without work-related obligations. I spent these weeks mostly with my sister and read a book every two days. One of the best I read was a collection of essays and talks by Cardinal Ratzinger, from 1992 but published just this summer, entitled *Values in a Time of Upheaval* (*Werte in Zeiten des Umbruchs, Valeurs pour un temps de crise*; my references are to the French edition). Of the many recent re-publications of Cardinal Ratzinger's writings, I could not imagine recommending any other one more enthusiastically.

Much popular journalism categorizes a theologian as either conservative or liberal. As Cardinal Ratzinger himself notes, on page 71, we are inclined to pay more attention to an author's presumed political "color" than to the content of his thought. Given those two choices, we know how the Cardinal is general classified. Reading this book, however, will introduce you to a man with an extraordinarily fertile mind, more capable than most of imagining a multiplicity of answers to the most complex questions and then attempting to understand which of these possibilities best accounts for reality.

The book includes two essays and two conferences, dealing with different but inter-related questions:

How can a human being be both **free and responsible** for the good of the society in which he lives? ("Freedom, Right , and the Good")

Is relativism necessary to insure a truly pluralistic and democratic society? What does it mean to speak of **truth** in a pluralist society? Does truth make tolerance impossible? (“What is truth?”)

Does **conscience** exempt a person from obedience to the truth? (“If you desire peace... Conscience & Truth”)

Can the **Christian faith**, born in a Judeo-Greek **culture**, be “translated” into another culture? (“Faith, religion and culture”)

Freedom, truth, conscience and culture... The author is not afraid to ask the hard questions. He addresses them with a broad knowledge of the important authors, ancient and contemporary, who have tried to respond to these questions, and his own attempts to respond are striking in their clarity, depth, and modesty.

Regarding freedom, for example, Ratzinger uses the example of Andrei Sacharow to explain the responsibility of each individual for the common good (even if one’s “specialty” is more narrowly focused). “Freedom, he writes, retains its dignity only if it continually refers itself to its moral foundation and its moral mission.” (p. 16) But the question arises: in a free democracy, how do we insist on respect for what is right and good without imposing a definition arbitrarily? Listen to the head of the Congregation for the Faith speaking. The Church is “a community of conviction... She must speak from her own freedom to the freedom of everyone.” It is by reason and persuasion that the Church speaks so that the heritage of our moral principles may continue to be strong in our own day.

In his second essay, Ratzinger notes that it is difficult to speak of truth today. Truth congers up intolerance; it is more a private matter than a public value. Is democracy founded on relativism or on some inalienable, objective truths about the human condition? To answer the question, one needs to consider the role of the State: is it meant to create some form of earthly paradise (a project at which Nazism and communism failed)? Or is its role more modest? Truth does not come from politics or the State, but rather the contrary: truth precedes politics, making just practice possible. What is most important then is this search for understanding, and it is not as revealed religion that Christianity is a source of truth for politics, but as a kind of “leaven and form of life that has proven itself on the stage of history.” (page 40).

The third and fourth essays are no less rich and subtle in their reflections. It is perhaps those that would be most useful for our mission in today's world: reflections on conscience and authority, on faith and culture, on the possibility of mission with due respect for the convictions of others.

As I think about this book, what I find most impressive is the author's sense of wonder. It is not a "hermeneutical suspicion" that propels his investigation. It is wonder in the face of a mystery much greater than himself and in which he participates. It is a wonder that is marked by joy and trust, the joy of discovery and trust in the ultimate goodness of creation.

Like Pope Benedict, the General Council and I are at the beginning of our mission at your service. It is with joy and trust that we undertake the mission. After three weeks of meeting, I would have things to report to you, but I thought that it would be best simply to tell you of the wonder to which we feel called. And to ask for your continued prayers.

“For me, peace is...”

December 2005

Ask two people what peace is, and you will probably hear two different definitions. Peace is such an important reality for us that we've all given it some thought and we all have our own convictions about it. Besides, the reality is so rich, no one person could possibly exhaust its meaning.

Notice that some of the definitions seem to be in opposition to each other. For example, is it not the responsibility of the head of state and the loyal citizen to seek above all peace for their own country? But what if peace for their country interferes with or diminishes the peace of another country? Does it cease to be peace? Whose definition of peace should prevail? Or perhaps the interests of one country for peace should be sacrificed to the interests of another? Where are the lines to be drawn? Should all national interests be set aside and one "world government" be established? Would that make peace easier to define or more attainable?

Questions regarding peace among nations are numerous, but do we have fewer questions about peace among brothers in community? Or is peace of heart, to speak of the personal level, less mysterious to us or easier to obtain? Perhaps God's Word could enlighten us. "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you." (John 14:27) But also: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace upon the earth. I have come to bring not peace but the sword." (Matthew 10:34) Jesus, Prince of peace, ended his life not peacefully but as the accepting victim of an angry and violent mob. What was peace for Jesus?

My questions are not meant to suggest that there is nothing true we can say about peace, but that the truth about peace is not easy to grasp. Peace is one of those realities that we should approach with great modesty and in respectful dialogue with others. And it is clear that acting on the demands of peace requires great prudence and good judgment. It would be contradictory if our talk and action regarding peace led to conflict or the condemnation of others. Does the mystery of peace sufficiently inspire in us that kind of respect?

On the occasion of the World Day of Peace, on 1 January 2006, my prayer is that our longing for peace push us to reflect deeply on its meaning and its demands and to be true agents of peace first in our own backyard and then in the world. This year, I asked each member of the General Council for his definition of peace. Consider our modest definitions as our gift to you for the new year, an expression of our prayer that peace be more fully realized in our world, in our countries, in our communities, and in our hearts in the year to come.

"Not as the world gives peace do I give it to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid."
(John 14:27)

P.S. A General Chapter is at once texts... and men! The Acts of the Chapter will soon be published. But then you need men who have the ability (and the desire) to implement all of these decisions. They are the ones who incarnate in their lives first of all the convictions that we expressed during our meetings in Rome. These few men, rich in experience, in abilities, and in the desire to be of service to brothers and sisters that they love, will make up a small community that we call the General Council. We introduce ourselves in this special issue of our news bulletin, to tell you who we are, with our gifts but also our poverty; we are who we are now for you.

In September, when we have more time, we will think more about the mission that the Chapter has entrusted to us and to the suggestions that you will make. Then we will be in a position to

tell you how all of this will be organized and how we will distribute responsibilities amongst ourselves.

May the Spirit continue to accompany us in this ministry.

“Truth Trumps Culture”

March 2006

The title is meant to be a bit provocative. I'd like to get an argument started. More precisely, I'm hoping to stir up some discussion and debate.

The Pope has been speaking so much about the truth lately. It seems that in every talk he gives, the word appears. Not long ago, a serious Catholic journalist I know tried to convince me that the word “truth” had little meaning nowadays; even worse, that it had negative connotations. It conjured up images of dogmatism, of closed-mindedness, even of “fascism”, and consequently did more to impede dialogue than help it. He thought we would do well to try to find a replacement that would have more meaning for our contemporaries. I must admit that I was somewhat sympathetic to his argument. I recall my days on a university campus, where people discussed and debated at great length, but they would have considered it arrogant to claim that they were articulating the truth about reality. There was a kind of humility in the approach, except that in the end people held onto their own opinions and rarely changed their way of thinking.

I've been thinking about this, not just because of the Pope's insistence on truth, but because of our reflection at the General Chapter about diverse gifts in one body. One important way in which we are diverse in the Congregation is that we come from many different cultures. We are Spanish and Brazilian, from the United States and from the Congo, from twenty-eight different countries, and within those countries from different regions and tribes, with different histories and languages. And that's not the end of it. There is a youth culture in the Congregation, and a senior culture, and a professional culture. There is a city culture and a rural culture, a culture of mystics, of pastors, of social activists. But for the moment, let's stay with national cultures.

If we insisted on “many gifts” at the Chapter, it's because we recognized the wealth that our

cultures represent. We can help to make a globalized world more human by recognizing the dignity of each person and each culture. Could it be that faced with the homogenization of culture required to build the tower of Babel (a modern-day equivalent might be what some call the “Macdonald movement”), Yahweh decided to restore the variety and dignity of His creation by giving rise to many different languages? Within the Congregation, we need to make very deliberate decisions and take very concrete steps to assure that this diversity is not watered down.

But another movement, which some call the “Diversity movement”, has also moved in an unacceptable direction. “You just don’t understand! How can you? You’re from a different culture.” Within religious circles, some efforts at inculturation have followed in this same direction. It is in the face of this that I say that “truth trumps culture”. What does the truth have to say in the face of a culture that says that the individual is supreme and that society has no claims to make on individuals citizens? What does the truth have to say in the face of a culture that says that the economy has the last word? What does the truth have to say in the face of a culture that says that the poor have no rights because they have no power? What does the truth have to say in the face of a culture that denies religious freedom or the dignity of the elderly or the rights of the unborn? What does the truth of the Gospel have to say in the face of a culture that says that God is a powerful Lord with whom mortal humans can have no personal relationship of love?

If the truth were easy to identify, then the problems to which my questions allude would never arise. If we men and women were so well ordered to the truth in our minds and hearts, then we could easily recognize the truth and live accordingly. However, that is not the case... which is a good reason to be very modest. But not a good reason to feel defeated or to surrender the truth. “A heart contrite and humbled, O Lord, you will not spurn.” (Psalm 51:19)

Faced with the truth of his Father’s love, for himself and for the world, Jesus neither lost heart nor determination. However, in the face of that truth and to reveal such a love as clearly as possible, he surrendered his life. Truth trumps culture. In Jesus’ case, it led him to the Cross.

May this Pascal mystery be a source of joy and strength for all us.

“The Shell and the Seeker”

June 2006

You know the story of Saint Augustine, who one day encountered a young boy on the beach, pouring water into a hole with a shell. When asked what he was doing, he explained that he was pouring the sea into the hole. Augustine was amused and explained to the callow youth that he had embarked on a very difficult task. “No more difficult,” said the boy, “than your attempt to write a book on the Holy Trinity.”

This legend is about the same Augustine, who in his Confessions reflects on his discovery (at 19 years of age!) of Cicero’s Hortensius with its “exhortation to philosophy.” “The book changed my way of feeling and the character of my prayers to you, O Lord... My heart burned with longing for the immortality that wisdom seemed to promise... O Truth, how the deepest and innermost marrow of my mind ached for you.” (See Confessions, III, 4,7 and 6,10) Augustine later asserts: “I could more easily have doubted that I was alive than that truth exists, truth that is seen and understood through the things that are made.” (VII,10,16)

Great confidence and great humility.

I have heard to my delight that my last editorial in these pages stirred a good amount of discussion, among young and old. Some were very skeptical, others very appreciative. Saint Augustine has a word for both groups: confidence and humility.

We can all tell stories of people who used what they called the truth to impose their own will and to silence the critics. Fortunately, there were courageous men like Vaclav Havel, during the Communist era in Czechoslovakia, who dared to call those “truths” the lies that they were in fact. Such “liars” need to be reminded that the search for truth is an arduous and humbling task, and the bits and pieces of the truth that the search yields call us to obedience and lives shaped in harmony with the truth discovered. The example of our spiritual Father, Saint Augustine, can teach us a great deal in this regard.

And to those who think that truth cannot be known or that the notion itself is just too dangerous, I recommend this brief and modest reflection on the question:

In the course of my intellectual life, I experienced very acutely the problem of whether it isn’t

actually presumptuous to say that we can know the truth—in the face of all our limitations. I also asked myself to what extent it might not be better to suppress this category. In pursuing this question, however, I was able to observe and also to grasp that relinquishing truth doesn't solve anything but, on the contrary, leads to the tyranny of caprice. In that case, the only thing that can remain is really what we decide on and can replace at will. Man is degraded if he can't know truth, if everything, in the final analysis, is just the product of an individual or collective decision. In this way it became clear to me how important it is that we don't lose the concept of truth, in spite of the menaces and perils that it doubtless carries with it. It has to remain as a central category, as a demand on us that doesn't give us rights but requires, on the contrary, our humility and our obedience and can lead us to a common path.

Humility, obedience, community, friendship. The truth reveals itself to the one who searches for it humbly. It demands nothing less than full obedience. Its fruit is profound communion, which far surpasses polite tolerance or mutual "acceptance".

The words quoted are from Joseph Ratzinger in 1996. It is telling that the shell figures in the most prominent place on his papal coat of arms. And like most papal coats of arms, his does not include his motto, which nonetheless we know to be "co-workers in the truth".

“Miracles: for or against?”

September 2006

Thomas Jefferson, the third President of the United States, considered himself to be a Christian. He read the Bible carefully. In what is left today of his extensive library, there is a copy of the New Testament, which he himself had annotated in a surprising way. With a red pencil, he crossed out all of the references in the Gospels to Jesus' miracles and to the resurrection. He greatly admired the moral and social teaching of Jesus, but considered the miraculous actions and events of his life to be irrelevant and not to be admired by any thinking man.

Most of us, I imagine, would not think of Jefferson as an "orthodox" Christian. The fact is, Jefferson admired the Unitarians, who profess belief neither in the Trinity nor in the divinity of Christ.

Why talk of Jefferson and the Unitarians?

In early September, I often review the events of the summer in my own calendar and in the calendar of the Congregation and our various communities. A great deal took place at the international level. Over eighty brothers and sisters from six Congregations of the family gathered in Nairobi for the third RIAD, this year on the theme of dialogue and culture in Africa. In July, in Paris, the Religious sisters of the Assumption gathered in General Chapter and elected a new Superior General and General council. At the same time, in Paris, the Little Sisters held an international session on peace and the culture of non-violence for members of our Assumption family. Many other events were organized by our various Provinces, and even these had international representation: retreats in many regions (Africa, United States, Spain...), the Université d'Été and the Lourdes pilgrimage in France, special celebrations in Chile, etc.

I have been thinking in particular about one of the Congregation events that took place in Paris at the beginning of August: the first meeting of the Postulation committee named to assist Fr. Vincent Cabanac in his work as Postulator for the Congregation. Fr. Vincent was named at the end of our General Chapter last year in view of preparing for the beatification of Fr. d'Alzon. He and his team have foreseen a number of initiatives in order to foster greater devotion to this cause and more specifically to investigate the healings that have been attributed to Fr. d'Alzon's intervention and prepare the technical dossiers that the Congregation for Saints requires in presenting claims of miracles.

The work of the Postulation committee (as well as that of a group planning the 200th anniversary in 2010 of the founder's birth) should help to increase our interest in and devotion to the founder and his spiritual teaching. But the Congregation for the Causes of Saints recently confirmed the need for a miraculous healing as part of the canonization process. I've been wondering about the wisdom of this requirement and am beginning to see it as a direct challenge to Jefferson's kind of faith. It is helping me to measure the depth of my own.

In the midst of daily challenges and struggles, how often do I pray for God's intervention? We need to assume responsibility for our own life and not be turning to God at every moment to lighten our load. But has that effort to be responsible made it difficult for me to recognize my own real limitations and the need I have for the God who made me and sustains me in being each day? Isn't everything a gift from God, even that capacity to be responsible? As Georges Bernanos, the French novelist, said (probably quoting St. Thérèse de Lisieux): "All is grace."

Father Wilfrid Dufault, once Postulator for the cause of beatification of the Founder, always direct in his speech, used to say toward the end of his life: "We're not praying for miracles because we don't believe enough." It's clear that praying for miracles does have to do with the

nature of our faith. Is ours of a Jeffersonian (i.e. Enlightenment) kind? Or more like that of Bernanos.

“Ecumenism: ‘At the forefront of our ecclesial concerns...’
”

December 2006

The Pope’s priority is clear!

This is how Benedict XVI formulated it on Saturday, 1 December 2006, when our brother, Bishop Louis-Armel Pelatre, received him in his Cathedral in Istanbul:

“Twenty-seven years ago, in this very Cathedral, my predecessor, the Servant of God John Paul II, expressed his hope that the dawn of the new millennium would ‘rise upon a Church that has found again her full unity...’ (Homily in the Cathedral of Istanbul, 5). This hope has not yet been realized, but the Pope still longs to see it fulfilled, and it impels us, as disciples of Christ advancing with our hesitations and limitations along the path to unity, to act ceaselessly ‘for the good of all’, putting **ecumenism at the forefront of our ecclesial concerns**. Thus we will truly live by the Spirit of Jesus, at the service of the common good.”

Can ecumenism possibly be at the forefront of our ecclesial concerns? When in the West churches seem to be emptying and religious communities are finding it difficult to recruit members, when even in the southern hemisphere there are signs that religious practice seems to be declining, how can we possibly give so much importance to inter-Church relations? Does anyone really care, when for many people the Gospel itself seems fairly irrelevant? Isn’t ecumenism like re-arranging the deck-chairs on the Titanic?

And what importance could ecumenism have for those parts of the world where inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue seems more pressing? Or where other concerns, such as crushing poverty or debilitating violence, clamor for attention?

“Ecumenism” should be “at the forefront of our ecclesial concerns.”

For Benedict, as it was for John Paul II, the answer is simple: Full unity among Christians will allow us “to bear witness better, amid the exacerbated tensions of this world, to God’s transcendent love, manifested in his Son Jesus Christ.” (Homily of John Paul II in the Cathedral of the Holy Spirit, Istanbul, 29 September 1979) To preach peace, to alleviate the suffering of the poor, to put love into practice in this way, it is all meaningless if Christians themselves, who say their program is love, do not love another.

The absence of unity is a denial of God. Jesus made that clear when he expressed his own priority: “That they may be one as we are one.” Indifference to unity is to indifference to what is truest about God, namely the love that binds together Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Jesus came to gather all nations into one. Is that not the Kingdom of God?

Communion among Christians is therefore at the heart of our faith. Ecumenism is at the forefront of our ecclesial concerns.

So, to what does this call us as Assumptionists? That was my question and my prayer during my stay in Istanbul from November 28th to December 2nd. It was the topic of long conversations with Fr. Bernard LeLeannec, the delegate of the Provincial of France for the Mission in the Orient. And it was an important question on the recent agenda of the General Council meeting in December.

You will be able to read more about the results of all of this prayer and reflection in a longer letter that I have written on this first priority of the Congregation, our ecumenical mission. My desire is that we will be able to re-invigorate our commitment to this mission, one that mobilized hundreds of Assumptionists and inspired three of our confreres to give them totally, including their physical lives, for the service of the Kingdom in this way. May they intercede for us in heaven so that we might be faithful to the cause for which they sacrificed so much.

Be assured of my fraternal prayers and best wishes during this time when we celebrate one again the mystery of the Incarnation.

“Politics, People, and Truth”

March 2007

Yesterday, violence erupted once again in Kinshasa (D.R. of Congo), as troops of the defeated presidential candidate, Jean-Pierre Bemba, clashed with government forces. I am reminded that, toward the end of the presidential campaign in September, the late Cardinal Archbishop of Kinshasa made a statement that all too clearly hinted at his support for Bemba. I do not know anyone who thought that the Cardinal's statement was an appropriate intervention for a Church spokesman. And yet we believe that the Church must be seriously engaged in the political and social life of men and women today. She “cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice.” (Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 28)

The major theme for reflection at this year's Council of Congregation, meeting in Rome from 16–25 April, is the General Chapter's invitation to all of us to work “for a more just world” (see General Chapter Acts, 29–36). At the Chapter, one delegate lamented the fact that we have made statements about justice and peace at the last three Chapters, at least, but that we seemed to be making no progress in this regard.

My own assessment is more optimistic. In the dossier of one of our brothers who recently requested to be ordained a deacon, I read with great interest about the many ways in which he had given flesh to his commitment to the poor: Catholic Action groups, Saint Vincent de Paul projects, prison ministry... “I was and I remain marked by the problem of justice among human beings.” His great preoccupation is “to fight for the freeing of man as man.” He takes it as a vocation to be “the voice of those without a voice, to fight for justice in the world and equality among men.” This has also led him to study and write about justice. His reading of Vaclav Havel led him to the conviction that “politics should also obey truth and justice.” “A good number of my articles seek to communicate the cry of those who suffer, abandoned to themselves with no one to care for them. My goal is to draw attention to these people so that others may also come to their aid.”

What I appreciated in our young brother's approach was his effort to marry action and reflection. Justice is not a concept or a program; it is first of all people. And it is also the fruit of serious reflection: “Politics should also obey truth”, as he puts it.

The upcoming meeting of the Council of Congregation will try to help us address these two levels: the level of action and the level of reflection. First, we will reflect on the different

convictions we have about this call to work for a more just world. And then, we will take stock of the efforts in our Provinces of brothers, often working with lay associates, who in their work are deliberately seeking to build this kind of world.

I suppose the Archbishop of Kinshasa considered his intervention to be in keeping with his responsibilities. His error makes it clear that, when it comes to pronouncing itself in such matters, the Church must be prophetic and discerning at the same time. The urgency of acting in favor of justice and peace should not blind us to the need for study, reflection, and dialogue, and a good place to start would be a careful reading of Pope Benedict's own contribution to that conversation in his recent encyclical.

Please pray for a fruitful outcome to our discussions at the Council of Congregation, and continue praying for peace in the Congo.

Many blessings of the Paschal Season.

“D’Alzon—model of holiness”

June 2007

We will long remember the rain that fell without interruption on the morning of 3 June in Saint Peter's square. But it's not the only thing we'll remember about the event that the Assumption family celebrated on that day. Marie-Eugénie de Jésus was made a saint of the universal Church, and yet she seemed closer than ever to so many of us, women and men, religious and lay, who gathered that morning to pray. I was struck by the joy on the faces and in the hearts of the sisters of course, but also among the Assumptionists, the young Assumption students, and the many lay friends of the Congregation. Marie-Eugénie really seemed to be a mother or a sister or a friend to so many.

And, without fail, whenever a sister approached me, she would say: “Next time, it will be Father d’Alzon.”

That day will come, I am confident, the more we draw closer to the person of Father d'Alzon, as I sensed so many people had allowed Marie-Eugénie to draw close to them.

You can think of Father d'Alzon in many roles: Church leader, religious founder, public reformer, educator, pastor, preacher... And, especially since the centenary in 1980, we have explored many of these dimensions and come to measure the greatness of the man.

Now, as we prepare to celebrate in 2010 the two-hundredth anniversary of his birth, I suggest a slightly different emphasis. Let's do all we can to draw closer to the man, a model of sanctity for us and the one who can accompany us in our own pilgrimage. He did this as an important part of his ministry for so many people, including Saint Marie-Eugénie. Now let's turn to him as a spiritual father and ask him to help us along our own path of holiness.

There is in fact in Father d'Alzon a profound spiritual teaching and an experience of God that we may not yet sufficiently appreciate. Father Jean-Paul Périer-Muzet's *Praying 15 Days with Father d'Alzon* approaches the founder with this perspective, helping us to learn from his spiritual wisdom. Some of you have preached retreats using Father d'Alzon's writings and themes. Others have written about prayer and discernment methods in the light of his spirituality. All of these initiatives are pointing us in the right direction.

The 2010 Celebration Committee, chaired by Father Bernard Holzer, made a number of suggestions, which were presented in May to the members of the Council of Congregation. These have been ratified and will soon be communicated to you all. I suggest we deploy all of these means with one goal in mind: to draw closer to our elder brother, who can help us in turn draw closer to God.

That won't happen automatically, however. The General Council has decided on one method. We are preparing a list of the five or six major turning points in d'Alzon's own spiritual journey ("chemin de sainteté"), and we will each choose one of these and around that event do some thinking and reading. During the year to come, beginning in September, we will spend at least a day together reflecting on each of these events in turn. Perhaps at the end of the year, we will be ready to volunteer our services to animate retreats in the communities and Provinces. It is our hope that this simple effort will enable us to deepen our own relationship with the founder. The nice thing about the method is that it works even if you are not an expert on Father d'Alzon's writings or on 19th century history; even the basic knowledge that we've all acquired from novitiate courses and informal reading since will be sufficient.

We've been talking a great deal about miracles recently. Father Marcel Catteau (Madagascar), who not long ago successfully underwent open-heart surgery, prayed to Father d'Alzon before his operation and is convinced that he has been restored to health through the founder's intercession. The Congregation for the Causes of Saints will probably not recognize this miracle in view of Father d'Alzon's beatification, but it is clear that Father d'Alzon is playing an important role in Marcel's life. To the extent that this happens for each one of us, the beatification will take place and will only confirm what we already know and have experienced.

“A Mustard Seed: Our Near-Eastern Mission”

September 2007

Sibiu is situated almost exactly in the center of Romania, one of the most important cultural and religious cities in the country. It has been designated as the European Capital of Culture for 2007.

And from the third to the ninth of September it was the site of the 3rd European Ecumenical Assembly, which brought together representatives of Orthodox, Protestant and Catholic communities from all over Europe.

Plovdiv is the second largest city in Bulgaria, its cultural capital with a history that goes further back than Rome's. And from the 20th of August until the 14th of September, approximately 30 Assumptionists and Oblate Sisters of the Assumption, gathered for their own immersion into the Orthodox world. A more modest event than that taking place in Romania, perhaps, but a significant one for our religious family.

The goal of the workshop in Plovdiv: to sensitize a new generation of religious to this century-old mission of our Congregations and to help them discover this essential element of our Assumptionist identity. It is too early to say what the fruits of the gathering will be: new undertakings at home, an openness to serving in one of our Near East communities, new spiritual insights... But after having talked with at least a half-dozen participants in the session, I can at least say that many left enthusiastic and awakened to a very unfamiliar reality.

As much work as it is to organize a three-week workshop for thirty people coming from fifteen different countries (with a great diversity of visa needs), the “Plovdiv experience” is a mustard seed, a small effort full of promise to achieve a great goal: the drawing closer together of two Church traditions separated for a thousand years, the fulfillment of Jesus’ prayer for unity among his followers.

There are other mustard seeds we need to recognize. About the time you receive this issue of AA Info, we will have published in four languages the booklet on our Near East mission requested by the last General Chapter. The hope is that this work will be useful for those in formation and for those who are unfamiliar with the story and significance of the Assumption’s work among Eastern Christians. It could even inspire some missionary vocations among religious and lay Assumptionists.

Another small seed: progress made toward re-establishing our community in Bucharest (see my letter “In one body”, January 2007). With some confidence now, we can move ahead with the restoration of our property in that city and the preparation of the community that will take up residence there and plan their mission.

And then there is the structuring of our community in Moscow. Father Edward Chatov, one of our young Russian brothers ordained not long ago, has been named local Superior. The new local treasurer, Viatcheslav (“Slava”) Gorokhov, will soon be ordained at Saint Louis.

Still another mustard seed not to be overlooked: for the first time in many, many years a young Bulgarian has made first profession as an Assumption. He is Brother Martin Doulchev, now beginning theological studies in our Florence community.

Yes, they are only mustard seeds, but the cause is no less great or beautiful for that reason. Should we regret the fact that all we have is mustard seeds? More and more, I’m inclined to think that having only mustard seeds is a grace. The Kingdom of God is like these modest seeds. Perhaps it’s time to let go of even the desire to plant with more impressive means.

“God Has Given Himself an Image”

December 2007

“God has given himself an ‘image’: in Christ who was made man... God now reveals his true face in the figure of the sufferer who shares man’s God-forsaken condition by taking it upon himself. This innocent sufferer has attained the certitude of hope: there is a God, and God can create justice in a way that we cannot conceive, yet we can begin to grasp it through faith. Yes, there is a resurrection of the flesh... There is an ‘undoing’ of past suffering, a reparation that sets things aright. For this reason, faith in the Last Judgment is first and foremost hope.” Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi*, par. 43

You’ll find it odd that I should choose an image from Michelangelo’s Last Judgment (in the Sistine Chapel) as the inspiration for my word to you in this Christmas issue of AA News. Actually, it’s probably not so inopportune, given the fact that I am writing in Advent, a season we began with more than one reference to the end-time.

The real reason, however, is that I just read a review of the Pope’s recent encyclical, *Spe Salvi*, that sees Benedict’s reflection as a commentary on the artist’s fresco in the Vatican (see especially par. 41–47). Bringing the two things together is a clever insight, even if Benedict didn’t intend to make the link, but I think the author of the review may have misinterpreted Michelangelo, and perhaps missed the point of the Pope’s profound and rich reflection on the virtue of hope.

How many descriptions have I read of Michelangelo’s “stern” depiction of the powerful Christ-figure who stands in judgment over history and the human race and raises his right hand in a threatening gesture of condemnation! (The most recent: Henrich Pfeiffer, s.j., *La Sistine svelata*, Ed. Vaticana, 2007) We might be intimidated by the physique the artist gave to his figure, as well as by the seriousness of the expression on his face. But how is it possible to see that expression as stern? Full of confidence, serious but serene, dynamic and energized even down to the curls on his head, powerful but controlled. And the gesture! Condemnation? Look at the fingers on the left hand. You could almost call them delicate. However inappropriate, I can only imagine Christ as the conductor of a symphony, gently silencing one part of the orchestra and with his right hand and arm trying to summon all of the volume and harmony that the musicians can produce. And the conductor engages in a kind of athletic dance, rising from a seated position at the climax of the symphony.

The rest of the fresco helps us understand the purpose of Christ’s energetic but elegant gesture. It is true that some figures below are descending tragically into a fiery abyss, the direction in which Christ looks not with anger but with a kind of sad benevolence, most of the

figures to Christ's right and left are being summoned upwards as if by the power of his arms. This is a fresco less about the last judgment and more about the resurrection of the flesh and the gathering together of the risen around Christ and the other blessed that surround Him.

This is the quality of the hope to which we are called. Pope Benedict puts it this way. "The prospect of the Judgment has influenced Christians...as a summons to their conscience, and at the same time as hope in God's justice." (par. 41) "The image of the Last Judgment is not primarily an image of terror, but an image of hope; for us it may even be the decisive image of hope. Is it not also a frightening image? I would say: it is an image that evokes responsibility, an image, therefore, of that fear of which Saint Hilary spoke when he said that all our fear has its place in love. God is justice and creates justice. This is our consolation and our hope. And in his justice there is also grace." (par. 44) "At the moment of judgment we experience and we absorb the overwhelming power of his love over all the evil in the world and in ourselves. The pain of love becomes our salvation and our joy... The judgment of God is hope, both because it is justice and because it is grace. If it were merely grace, making all earthly things cease to matter, God would still owe us an answer to the question about justice—the crucial question that we ask of history and of God. If it were merely justice, in the end it could bring only fear to us all. The incarnation of God in Christ has so closely linked the two together—judgment and grace—that justice is firmly established." (par. 47)

Yes, our hope is not a kind of sweet optimism about our human reality. Our freedom is real only if it entails consequences. And Christ's power is real; the encounter at the end should be taken seriously. But God didn't create humankind in view of condemnation, and at the end the mercy and life made visible in His Son will be manifest for all to see.

Christmas is not for the faint-hearted. It is a serious encounter with God made flesh, beautiful, merciful, life-giving. May the blessing of such an encounter be yours this year.

“Vocation Ministry: a call to conversion”

March 2008

At the beginning of February, six brothers (Filippo Belli from Italy, Laurent Bodart from Belgium, John Franck from the USA, Benoît Gschwind from France, Tom O'Brien from England, and Juan Antonio Sanchez from Spain) met with Fr. Emmanuel and myself to talk about vocation ministry “in the north”. There was time to try to gather insights from our own vocational journey,

to talk about our convictions in this kind of work (as well as the joys and sufferings the work entails), and to exchange “methods” for doing vocation ministry. I was impressed with the dedication of our brothers in a mission that is not easy, by the abundance of insight and lucidity regarding the cultural and ecclesial context, and by the courage and imagination that our brothers bring to this work. Rather than say more, however, I would like to communicate to you in very few words some of the observations made during our four days together. I was surprised by some of them; you may disagree with others. My hope is that they will give you food for thought and trigger discussion among you.

A young person in discernment wants to know in fairly simple, concise terms who we are, what distinguishes us from the other Congregation that he just visited.

Blending in, being an anonymous presence in the world...that may have worked forty years ago in a more “triumphal”, more clearly and explicitly Christian context. But in a context where the Church is in a “minority” position, fairly invisible, overlooked or considered in an unfavorable light, being an anonymous presence loses a great deal of its meaning and will probably not be very effective in terms of vocation ministry.

To do vocation work effectively, you need to be well motivated. It’s not a matter of finding successors, people to do the work once we’re no longer able or to continue carrying on what’s been done for 150 years. It is clearly better to be motivated by love of the vocation and of the Assumption!

Young people thinking about a life-time commitment as a religious seem less attracted by the mission, and more by the common life, by a life of faith lived in a clear and radical manner.

We in the North could be discouraged by such small numbers, but wealth and abundance is not often praised in the Gospels.

Vocation ministers who are not supported by and working directly with brothers at their mission are in for trouble; likewise those who find themselves inviting candidates to visit a community where the members are in deep disagreement about the nature of religious life or basic teachings of the Church.

Vocations to religious life and priesthood arise among young people who have a Christian foundation (from their family, for example), who already have a minimal Christian awareness, who are asking themselves questions about their future and the possibility of such a vocation. Generally, vocations are not found among young people who are totally unaware of what Christian life is all about.

If the way a community lives is not sufficiently different (radical?) from what a young person lived “in the world”, he will wonder (is that a surprise?) why he should give up a career, married life and a family.

To be attracted to religious life or the priesthood, young people need to be able to “see” it. If religious are too few, too “invisible”, acting more as individuals than as brothers involved in a common project, young people will not be able to see us and can therefore not be attracted.

When we are involved in highly “visible” works, is there not some way to “take advantage” of them to make ourselves known?

These observations are probably not very relevant except “in the north”. What observations might similarly challenge us “in the south”?

Προσεχειν

June 2008

This issue of AA News includes a lengthy presentation of the work we did at the Council of Congregation in Gwangju. We also spent some time visiting with Bishop Vincent Ri Pyung-ho, of the diocese of Jeonju, to the north of Gwangju. I was very struck by what he had to say about the power of God’s Word. When it is taken seriously in the Church, in a community or by a person in his own life, it can do extraordinary things. The preparatory document for this year’s twelfth General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (October 2008) on “the Word of God in the life and mission of the Church” speaks of this Word as “living”, “piercing”, “active” (see Hebrews 4:12).

During recent canonical visitations, we have asked one question consistently: what place does the Word of God have in the life of your community? While insisting on the centrality of the Eucharist, our Rule first of all reminds us that our prayer life is nourished by God's Word, particularly through the meditation of the Scriptures (#47).

How do we tap into the power of God's Word? How do we communicate it to others?

Some have rediscovered the usefulness of *lectio divina*, a patristic form of prayer that has become more and more popular today. In almost every one of his retreats (many of which have been published and translated), Cardinal Carlo Martini has given simple guidelines for praying with the Scriptures in this way. For those in need of "refreshing" their life of prayer, I encourage you to give this very simple "method" some serious consideration.

Some of our communities are firmly committed to the practice of "Scripture-sharing" on a regular basis. I know at least one community that does it each day. That fifteen-minute daily exercise, gathers the community together at the deepest level and gives definite direction to the common and individual lives of the religious.

And in our frequent celebration of the Eucharist, we have the occasion to listen to at least two substantial passages from the Bible and often enough listen to a homily on the texts (or preach ourselves). In a recent talk, the Pope urged priests to take their preaching seriously, to prepare it well by personal meditation, to communicate not simply concepts or abstract doctrine but in a way that touches the lives of the faithful. What is the quality of the preaching in your community, or in your church? If you preach yourself, do you occasionally ask for reactions from your listeners or seek advice from preachers with more experience? The power of the Word can be considerably muted by a careless, unengaged preacher.

Not all of us preach, but most of us read during liturgical celebrations. By the way you read, do your listeners sense the power of the Word? Remember, that this does not happen automatically. Why not read the text before the celebration begins to be sure that you have understood it yourself and know what is of greatest importance in the text? That might require a preliminary meditation, in addition to a preliminary reading. When you read, do you speak at a pace that will allow the word to be understood and the meaning to be perceived? Have you grasped the meaning of the text yourself?

These are all useful practices, but even more importantly there is a fundamental attitude to be fostered as we confront God's Word. This attitude is best exemplified in the life of the hermit Anthony. We all know the story of his life (as recounted by Saint Athanasius, and taken up again by Augustine in the Confessions, VIII,vi,14). Around the age of eighteen, he found himself in church one day, and listening to the Gospel "he heard the Lord saying to the rich man, 'If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor...'" A few days later, "he heard in the Gospel the Lord saying, 'Do not be anxious about tomorrow'..." That was enough for Anthony. He sold everything and went off to the desert.

The Word was powerful and transformed Anthony's life, but it could do its work because Anthony was disposed. If you read the text of Anthony's biography carefully, you find one verb recurring on almost every page: **Προσεχειν**. It's the same word you find in the Gospels, when the disciples are urged to "be attentive" (e.g. Luke 21:34), to avoid falling asleep, becoming passive, unconscious. Anthony was "attentive to the readings", he was "attentive to himself", he contemplated, he noticed, he admired, he observed, he watched.

Προσεχειν

. The same word, translated differently, comes back so often in describing Anthony's fundamental disposition that we must conclude that this is an essential dimension of what it means to be a disciple. And it is the one attitude necessary if we are to welcome the Word of God and allow it to transform our own lives as well as that of our community and our Church.

"Word Made Flesh"

September 2008

"The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we saw his glory. I would say to an artist: Show this to us; with your chisels, your brushes, your songs, and your words, represent this mystery to us as you understand it." (Emmanuel d'Alzon, "Splendors of Christian art", 1859)

I was walking down a long, wide corridor in a major airport in Italy, heading toward my departure gate. Then I noticed that all of us heading in the same direction were walking in a very orderly fashion on the right side of the corridor. Those walking from their gate to the terminal were walking in a similar way on the left side of the corridor. When something that orderly occurs in Italy, you naturally wonder why! Then I deliberately looked up to the ceiling and noticed that on my side of the corridor there were skylights that allowed me to see to the bright sky and billowing clouds above. There were similar skylights on the left side of the corridor, but they

were angled in the opposite direction enabling only those people on that side of the corridor to see the sky. In other words, anyone who walked on the “wrong” side of the corridor couldn’t see the beautiful view above.

And then I was angry. I realized I had been “manipulated” by an architect. He had “obliged” me (and everyone around me) to walk on one side of the corridor without ever telling me explicitly to do so. I wasn’t angry for long, because I had learned in my body, so to speak, about the power of architecture. It not only provides more or less agreeable surroundings, which is to say that it’s not just a matter of “aesthetics”, but rather it influences the way we think and feel and act.

Since that experience long ago, I have become even more aware that architecture has a major impact on us, and we are often unaware of the power that it is exerting. You know the effect that the expansive, towering space of a big church, like a Gothic cathedral, has on you. I wonder if the students at Assumption College, where I taught for many years, knew the effect that their residence halls had on them; the buildings were designed like chicken coops with twenty rooms lined up along unending, poorly-lit, and impersonal straight corridors. We cannot escape the effect that buildings have on us, but I would suggest that too often we do not make enough effort to make these buildings conducive to the kind of life we want to live and the kind of work we want to do.

This is a long way of explaining to you why I am so pleased to say that the chapel at our General House has been renewed in a substantial way, thanks to the generosity of benefactors and to the members of the Council of Congregation who enabled us to pursue the project, and thanks also to the genius and spirit of Claudio Pastro, the artist/architect whose faith, rich theological thought, and visual sense gave birth to the renovation plan. Claudio Pastro, a former student of ours in Brazil and a world-renowned specialist in sacred art, has thought long and hard about art and architecture and in particular about the ways in which architecture can best nurture the faith of people and worshipping communities. There is a reason for each choice he made in the design of our chapel: the choice of colors and materials, the choice of style and symbols for the crucifix and the Pantocrator painted above the entrance doors, the location of each of the major elements in a worship space (altar, ambo, presidential seat, sacred reserve, baptismal water), etc.

Such attention to detail and workmanship in a large space like our chapel entails a certain expense,

but such an expense and the attention we give to the beauty of our places of worship are in the end justified by our faith in the mystery of a God who chose to take on human, visible form. That faith neither allows us to be totally and uniquely immersed in what is natural and material; nor does it allow us to scorn the inherent dignity of nature and the body. The artist's vocation is to help us train our senses to "see" in creation the presence of the divine. It is through His creation and most eminently through the humanity of His son that God chose to reveal Himself.

I'm clearly grateful for the beauty of our renewed worship space in Rome, but it's an occasion for me to invite all of you and each community to a renewed attentiveness to the beauty of the homes in which you live and the chapels in which you pray. This is more a question of attentiveness than a question of money. Some of the most beautiful religious houses and chapels I have seen were also some of the simplest and poorest. Consequently, more important than money are the care and the effort of each one of us in shaping the kind of environment I am describing. Of course it is clear that some of our brothers have special gifts and clearly more ability in this regard, and we should enable them to make their contribution, but all of us have a role to play.

Give some thought to the impact that your surroundings have on you in your community. Do not simply evaluate the appearance of your surroundings (whether or not they are ugly or beautiful), but ask yourselves how these surroundings affect the way you think, feel, work, and relate to each other in community; how they help or hinder your personal and common prayer. In what ways is this impact positive? How might it be enhanced?

Did you ever think that this could be the subject of your annual local Chapter or of a community meeting?

“Laity in the Church & in the Assumption”

December 2008

You know that for Assumptionists Christmas is an important time.

On Christmas day in 1845, Father d'Alzon and five companions began life together in view of establishing a new religious Order. And two days later four others began their own formation as

members of what Father d'Alzon had founded two months earlier, the Assumption Association, which he intended to be principally a lay organization.

It's an important feast for all Assumptionists, lay and religious alike, and I'm happy once again to send warm fraternal greetings to you all. But I'm also prompted to send this note to the other Superiors General of the Assumption family, to the sisters and their lay friends, because of a modest but remarkable gathering that took place at our General House in Rome on 8 December, just a few weeks ago.

Every year, the Assumptionists in Rome invite the sisters of the various Assumption communities in the area to gather for a celebration of the Immaculate Conception and of the anniversary of Father d'Alzon's death (21 November). A few years back, some of the sisters took the initiative to bring along a few of their lay friends. This year, as you can see in the photo taken in our chapel on that day, there were as many lay people as sisters and brothers.

Although we're fortunate in having frequent gatherings of religious from the different Congregations of the family, I don't remember many gatherings where lay friends of the five Congregations have gathered. Could this have been a first? It was a time of discovery... of differences, but also of similarities. It seems that everyone felt very much at home, in this broadened Assumption family.

On January 6th, approximately twenty religious from the five Congregations will be gathering here in Rome to reflect on the Assumption charism. The precise topic of study is "The human and spiritual experience at the heart of the Assumption charism." While we are giving ample time to reflection on the particularity of each charism, the focus is on the Assumption charism, i.e. on the elements of the charism that we hold in common.

Once again, differences and similarities, diversity and unity. Two very different events, on 8th December and 6

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January, but both an opportunity to discover anew the depth and breadth of the charism of the Assumption, which forms and inspires us all, whether we are women or men, lay or religious; whether we are principally focused on the contemplative life or gifted for working mainly with the poor; whether we are preachers or educators or missionaries; whether we are from the north or whether we are from the south.

I take these two events as invitations to give thanks for the rich diversity of the Assumption. In fact, to best use the gift, we would need to explore this variety even more and make even greater efforts to be faithful to the original inspiration that gave birth to each of our Congregations. Not for our sakes or to assert our independence, but to be good stewards of gifts that have been entrusted to us for the Church.

But I have to admit that I am mostly challenged to explore and, I'm inclined to say, "exploit" what unites us especially for the benefit of the Church and the world in which we live, a world with limited resources and in need of a witness to unity. Perhaps that is why I am so impressed by the two events I've described. The world is transformed by big ideas, by deep insights, and there aren't many of those. Saint Augustine had a few, and the world has been different ever since. I think there are one or two deep insights behind what we call the Assumption. I take it as a challenge to discover and deepen my understanding of these and to put them to work for the benefit of our human race. Perhaps we can do that together.

"The joy of the Gospel"

March 2009

Listen to what young people are saying about being Christian and evangelizing in today's world:

"I think we Christians need to show who we are and what we do... And also what we don't do. That's what's really important: everyday life. Not words, but an example."

(Rafal)

"Young people are very sensitive to music. They are interested in something dynamic, movement, dancing... The Gospel is "good news"; it's a question of leaving aside old ways in order to take a new path. So, it's a question of "grabbing" the interest of young people by offering them something alive and joyful. We should be able to communicate the joy of the Gospel, to show that we are living in God, that our life is different." (Minh)

"John Paul II... He was someone who knew how to show the joy of being Christian." (Michal)

“You more easily buy a book that has a beautiful and attractive cover. You more willingly read it than a book that looks dirty or old-fashioned... It’s the same thing for the Church. People, and young people in particular, will be more open to the possibility of going to church if what goes on there is attractive... beautiful music, for example. Only then will they be able to discover what’s less visible and have access to more important things... We have to know how to attract people and then lead them to “deeper waters”. (Tomasz)

“When they see the way we live, people ought to ask themselves questions... But there’s something else that’s important: to speak to young people, we need to speak their language. And today, the language is becoming more and more visual.” (Viktors)

I’m often asked : “How should we be doing vocation ministry today?” The question is being asked with some urgency in countries where there seem to be few vocations to the religious life, but it is being asked all over because of a pressing desire to be very clear about the nature and demands of this kind of life.

The young people I quote above [\[4\]](#) say very clearly something I’ve thought for a long time. In every culture, but especially in those cultures (such as the youth culture) where the Church’s usual language is no longer easily understood, we religious need to speak a language that is clear and simple and that makes a strong immediate impact. “To speak to young people, we need to speak their language.”

Such a language won’t exist of course unless it is spoken by people living their vocation deeply and authentically. But that’s not all that is necessary. We need to be attentive to the ways in which our message has become “obscured”, practically invisible. A perfectly legitimate and useful apostolic service might not be enough to “speak” to young people today: because it is not meeting a really urgent and evidently important need of the day, because it’s being done without much enthusiasm, because... A faithful and friendly religious community might not have much of an impact on young people today: because routine seems to have set in, because the community’s prayer seems too esoteric, because relations are overly formal, because... A religious community, active in a local neighborhood, might not attract recruits: because they’ve blended in so much that they’re invisible (they dress like everyone else, they speak like everyone else, they recreate like everyone else), because they’re never seen as a community, because... “I think we Christians need to show who we are and what we do...” “We should be able to communicate the joy of the Gospel, also to show that we are living in God, that our life is different.”

The picture that accompanies the article with the remarks quoted above shows the small Taizé community in a crowd of ten thousand young people. And what's remarkable is that they clearly stand out! They stand out visually ("Today, the language is becoming more and more visual.") because the twenty of them are dressed alike in white habits. And they are noticed because what they have to offer is simple, direct, and meets a deeply felt need of these young men and women. "So it's a question of 'seizing' the interest of young people by offering them something alive and joyful."

So, if we want to attract young people to religious life today, it won't be enough to gather together a few serious religious willing to work at it. They'll need to live their vocation with great clarity and also with great simplicity; they'll also need a "look", a way of relating to people, and a kind of mission that "speak", that are direct, that make a strong and immediate impact. I don't think the age of the religious makes a difference, but I wouldn't underestimate how difficult it is being that flexible, that open, that attentive...to the Spirit, to each other, to the young people of our day.

“Healing by Simple Friendship”

June 2009

I'm not a very religious man... at least not in the sense that that is often understood.

I have very little patience with long sermons, full of pious formulas that never seem to touch ground or reflect any real acquaintance with life. I don't like devotions mechanically carried out or a kind of antiquarian or self-referential approach to liturgy. A morality that bases itself mostly on laws and prescriptions I never find very persuasive. And I'm usually suspicious of "convinced" believers who feel threatened by every non-believer's question or challenge.

What exactly does it mean to be "religious"? And for those of us who accompany others in their search for God and in their growth as Christians, what is the message that we should be conveying to them?

This is how Joseph Ratzinger responded to that question in a book he published in 1989 (*Aus Christus Schauen: Einübung in Glaube, Hoffnung, Liebe*; in English translation, *The Yes of Jesus Christ*): "...being a Christian does not mean some special skill alongside other skills but simply the correct living out of being human..." The correct living out of being human! So much for "other skills" like pious formulas, mechanical devotions, formalist liturgies, and practices or doctrines without respect for reason.

Being a Christian... is nothing other than being fully human. Perhaps you find the statement surprising. It's less surprising, however, once you enter into the logic of the Incarnation. It's a logic that saint Augustine understood so well. "The Son of God, by becoming man, became the way. Walk like this human being, and you will come to God." (Sermon 141)

But I didn't have to go to saint Augustine to find that astounding pearl of wisdom. I can read it in the reflections of some of my brothers who, in their requests to be ordained or to make final vows, have shared a very similar insight.

One wrote: "I came to understand that the temptation to do something for others is so great that we often forget that what's most important is to be there for God. I remember those words of Jean Vannier: 'When they are with a dying person, many people try to do something for him, but very few just stay there by his side and hold his hand.' **One image I like a great deal is that of the risen Christ with the disciples of Emmaüs.**

He meets them along the road they're travelling. He walks at their pace. He's present to them in their sorrow, and in their fear and disappointment."

Another put it very succinctly. After describing the difficulty he had had working with prisoners, who were more than suspicious of the young "preacher" who was coming to deliver some pious message of consolation or worse some word of judgment, our young brother said he finally understood what the Gospel worker needed to do most of all. "First of all, you had to foster a friendly relationship to challenge the image that the prisoners had, thinking they were dealing with a saint who had come to judge them. They needed to know that it was instead a friend who loved them as they were. Slowly, confidence grew... **To my great satisfaction I learned that it is possible to heal a man by simple friendship...**

"

Sound easy? To be fully human is not easy. But doesn't this sound like a path worth following, a path of real joy and liberation? Isn't this what the world needs today?

“Crisis and Integral Human Development”

September 2009

We’ve moved into a new phase of the economic crisis, a rebuilding phase, but are we re-building on a more solid foundation? Some banks are once again prospering and paying their executives million-dollar bonuses (Newsweek, September 21, 2009, p. 32). Will we have learned anything from this crisis?

Caritas in veritate is one attempt to orient the rebuilding process in a new direction.

I’m not one for devouring papal encyclicals, although living in Rome makes you more attentive to their publication. But from the looks of things, you didn’t have to be “Roman” to sit up and take notice of this encyclical. I’ve been reading commentaries appearing almost weekly in the New York Times, in Le Monde, in local Italian newspapers, and of course in the Vatican daily, l’Osservatore Romano. There was even a recent statement signed by sixty-eight Evangelical scholars and pastors, unambiguously endorsing Pope Benedict’s vision: “As evangelical Protestants we applaud the release of Caritas in veritate... We call on Christians everywhere...to read, wrestle with, and respond to Caritas in veritatis... We commend the way in which this encyclical considers economic development in terms of the true trajectory for human flourishing...” (“Doing the Truth in Love: An Evangelical Call for Response to Caritas in Veritate”, August 18, 2009, see www.firstthings.com)

I finally read the encyclical at the beginning of August and found it difficult. Here are a few suggestions that might help. Read the first chapter first (what else?) and read it slowly. The rest of the document has its importance, but this first chapter lays the groundwork for what follows, the basic principles on which Benedict believes a sound economy can be built. Then read the next five chapters, knowing that they focus on five different, more narrow topics: the situation today (chapter 2), how notions of fraternity, gratuity and communion help us understand the business enterprise differently (chapter 3), rights and duties and the development of peoples (chapter 4), globalization, collaboration and communion (chapter 5), and finally technology (chapter 6).

Most of all, keep in mind that this encyclical is about one thing: **integral human development.**

Development that insists only on increasing material prosperity is not true development, which needs to take into account the whole human person. And what is the whole human person? This is where truth comes in: charity (in more narrow terms, development) “degenerates into sentimentality” (par. 3) if it isn’t founded on a true understanding of what makes human beings human. It’s a simple idea, but to point out its many consequences Benedict needs more than a hundred pages (in the official Vatican edition): consequences on the regulatory powers of government, on banking and speculation, on welfare and social security systems, on labor unions, on laws to promote respect for life, on religious freedom, on population growth, on the family, on energy and the environment, on education, on migration, even on the reform of international institutions like the United Nations.

As you read the Pope’s detailed reflections on all of these topics, you might find your attention wandering, but just remember the first chapter and some of its memorable but enduring insights: “Each person finds his good by adhering to God’s plan for him... In this plan, he finds his truth... To defend the truth, to articulate it with humility and compassion, and to bear witness to it in life are therefore exacting and indispensable forms of charity.” (par. 1) “Charity is at the heart of the Church’s social doctrine..., but charity in its turn needs to be understood, confirmed, and practiced in the light of truth.” (par. 2) “Fidelity to man requires fidelity to the truth.” (par. 9)

And most of all: “ ‘In the design of God, every man is called upon to develop and fulfill himself, for every life is a vocation.’ (Populorum Progressio, par. 15) This is what gives legitimacy to the Church’s involvement in the whole question of development. If development were concerned with merely technical aspects of human life, and not with the meaning of man’s pilgrimage through history in company with his fellow human beings, nor with identifying the goal of that journey, then the Church would not be entitled to speak on it.” (par. 16)

The Pope does not pretend to do the work of professional economists; that is not his competence. But in the light of the Gospel we like him should be able to say in today’s world what it means to be fully human and to speak clearly when being fully human is jeopardized by economic practices gone astray.

“Arma Virumque Cano”

December 2009

On 27 November in Nîmes we inaugurated the d’Alzon Museum, in French aptly enough called

“A Place of Memory” (“Lieu de mémoire”). You see a partial view of the museum on the cover of this issue of AA Info and more information on page 18. Some have wondered why we should bother to invest time, energy and resources in the creation of a “museum”! Should we not be funding projects for the future rather than focusing on stories from the past?

“Arma virumque cano...” I’ll never forget those opening lines of Virgil’s Aeneid, drummed into our heads by old Latin professor: “I sing of arms and a man...” It was beautiful poetry even for the fifteen-year old adolescent that I was; what was more appealing was the dramatic story of Aeneas’ adventures and how he came to be the legendary founder of the city in which I now live. A whole people learned how to speak and write and even think by listening again and again to that story being sung to them by their bards and poets. Dwelling on the past was no waste of time; it’s what made a Roman who he was, what made him different from others, what gave his existence color and substance.

Every great culture feels the need.

“And now I will praise those godly men, our ancestors...” wrote Jesus, son of Eleazar, son of Sirach, author of the book of Ecclesiasticus. The early Patriarchs, then Moses, Aaron and Phinehas, Joshua, Caleb and the Judges, Nathan, David and Solomon, and the prophets and the heroes after the exile. They all pass in review because they all have something to teach the Israelite people.

“You don’t build a new hut without using old bamboo.” It’s how the Bamileke people of Cameroon say the same thing.

We have no future unless we

remember the past, in as truthful and lucid a way as possible, making the effort to let the past speak for itself, reveal itself as it truly is, by studying the past, by speaking with its witnesses

learn from the past, not rejecting the past because it’s different or “translating” it into more modern terms, but allowing that difference to reveal to us new questions and new answers of

which we are unaware

bless the past, thanking God for what is revealed to us in the rich experience of those who have gone before us

build on the past rather than naively think we can invent something uniquely and radically new, but also with the conviction that we cannot live in the past and like our ancestors we must assume a responsibility toward those who will come after us.

Our D'Alzon Museum in Nîmes is a modest effort in this direction. As is our celebration of the 200th anniversary of Father d'Alzon's birth and baptism.

Allow me to conclude on a more personal note, not unrelated to the foregoing: a word of heartfelt gratitude for the many, many messages you sent on the occasion of my mom's death on 24 September. Religious brothers and sisters, lay Assumptionists, friends, with me you all recognize how much we owe to our parents, still present with us, because we remember them fondly, we have learned so much from them, we bless them, and pray that they help us continue the good work that they did during their own lives.

“A new image...”

March 2010

When Bishop Albert Rouet arrived in his diocese (of Poitiers, France), he wondered how he would be able to reorganize his parishes, given the fact that the number of priests was sharply diminishing. After extended discussions with priests and lay people in the diocese, he reached the conclusion that it was not mainly a question of reorganization at all, but a question of the Church's mission and even the way we think about Church. That led him to the conviction that the insights that were the fruit of their discussions were applicable not only to the particular situation of the Church in the West, but to Catholic communities everywhere.

To understand the Bishop's discovery, you must read his book (Un nouveau visage d'Eglise),

one that I wish were translated into a number of languages. Let me state it simply: the parish organization as it exists today is no longer adapted to the needs and not fully responsive to what Vatican II had in mind. It is based on an image of the Church that has the priest at its center (p. 27) with lay people as devoted and selfless adjuncts. A different vision of the Church places genuine Christian communities at the heart of the Church, communities assuming real responsibility for themselves, with a priest at their service (p. 35). As he explains, the parish is not the only structure possible; in many countries today the Church functions very differently, on the basis of small Christian communities. The Bishop has implemented this vision in his diocese, and from what I have been able to gather after asking a number of people the same question he seems to have met with a certain amount of success.

Now, my point is not to convince you of Bishop Rouet's position, but to underline the fact that reorganization in a community is often enough insufficient; what is really needed is a different way of understanding the nature of the community and of its different functions. In order to address the problems of his diocese, what was required of the diocese of Poitiers? Il s'agissait « d'opérer une véritable révolution copernicienne : passer de l'état de laïcs qui tournent autour du prêtre...au statut de communautés réelles, responsables, avec un prêtre à leur service, allant de l'une à l'autre en prenant son temps. » (35) A copernican revolution! The Bishop insists : « We need to insist on the foundations of Church life: not a structure primarily, but a return to the true nature of the Church. In this sense, it's a question of converting to what the Gospel reveals as most fundamental for Christian communities.» (39)

As the Assumptionists prepare for a General Chapter, I believe a similar kind of revolution is necessary. The principal question facing us is not a question of reorganization. It is rather a question of how we see the Congregation and its mission today. We will not find the right organization for tomorrow if we retain an image of the Congregation that was appropriate 50–100 years ago.

Not doubting for one moment that Assumptionists today seek to live and work in as vital and dynamic a way as possible, I believe that the dominant image of the Congregation as a loose federation of Provinces leads us to invest enormous amounts of energy in keeping each of our Provinces afloat and in good health, energy that could better be used at the service of our mission and at the service of strong apostolic communities. This image leads many to believe that the vitality of communities and apostolates can only be assured by vital Provinces. Bishop Rouet faced the same kind of circular reasoning: parishes are weak, therefore the mission will suffer, and consequently we need to strengthen parishes. Instead, he dared think outside of this box: perhaps the weakness of our parishes should force us to ask whether or not parishes are the best way to do the Church's mission; might there be a better way? The question he might put to us: Is the Provincial structure the only way to assure the vitality of your mission and your communities? Is it the best way given the needs of the mission today, a mission that has a

decidedly global and international character, a mission that cannot be assured except in collaboration with as many as possible, including lay people and sisters of the family?

These are serious questions that invite us to think more deeply and perhaps more radically that we might like. In some ways, it is our poverty that gives us the opportunity to do this kind of thinking, but as Bishop Rouet writes at one point: “The Council’s desire was to be “a poor Church”, and this prayer has been answered! But we no longer want this because real poverty is hard to live...” I believe that this is an opportunity not to be missed.

“The Church in crisis”

June 2010

Everyone has been writing about the crisis facing the Church, provoked by the scandal of sexual abuse by members of the clergy. Headlines have been numerous and alarming especially in Europe recently. A few years ago, they were appearing in the United States. And tomorrow...

Here in Rome, we’ve been following articles in the Italian dailies and listening attentively to allusions in every papal pronouncement, whether at the Wednesday audiences or airplane press-conferences or speeches to Bishops at the end of ad limina visits. We had a few guests in community who provided some insights: Cardinal Rodé (head of the Vatican Congregation for religious), Frederic Mounier (the La Croix Rome correspondent), Archbishop Marini (former Master of Ceremonies for the Pope).

I thought I should write about this; it seems too important to pass by in silence. But much of what I’ve heard and read has not been helpful, and I am reluctant to add to the chatter.

As it happens, I was struck by something one of my young confrères recently wrote. He had just made an important decision in his life and was trying to understand why that was so difficult, especially for young people today. This is how he explained it and how he hoped to address the challenge. “Many find it hard to make a commitment, whether in marriage or in religious life. Let them learn to take a risk. To embark finally on an ‘adventure of responsibility’. What they seem to be lacking in fact is hope in a better future. As Pope Benedict XVI said..., the socio-political

situation in our countries...has led young people to be totally lethargy. I think the way to help them is to meet them and invite them to be courageous, to learn how take risks and to believe in God, the master of history.”

“The adventure of responsibility!” Isn’t that what it’s all about? It really is an adventure. I’m reminded of what the Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from prison in 1943 on the occasion of his friends’ marriage: “Every wedding must be an occasion of joy that human beings can do such great things, that they have been given such immense freedom and power to take the helm in their life’s journey.” It’s not just a matter of being “responsible”, of bearing the burden of responsibility. Bonhoeffer speaks of it as a motive for joy; my brother wrote about it as a sign of hope.

Well, it may be an adventure and a motive for joy, but as my confrère suggested we’re not always ready to assume responsibility...for the major decisions that can orient our entire life or even for what we do and say on a daily basis: for the way we treat people, for the quality of our work, for the consequences of our decisions and actions, for the concrete living out of our solemn pronouncements and commitments.

Hasn’t this crisis in the Church been provoked in good part because we find it difficult to be responsible? I am thinking of those whose crimes have in good part caused this crisis and of their victims. I am thinking of Church authorities who have managed or mismanaged events in the past. I am thinking of journalists and lawyers who have been important players in this drama. The crisis in the end is a failure of responsibility. As adults, we have choices to make; no one can assume our responsibility in our place. Religious and priests have responsibilities toward those they are committed to serve. Bishops and other authorities in the Church do not just officiate from a distance, but are meant to exercise leadership efficiently, responsibly and with pastoral concern for persons. Journalists have responsibilities to advance the cause of truth more than that of their reputations; lawyers have justice not profit as their primary responsibility.

We all have choices to make, and we need to be clear about the criteria that will guide our choices and be courageous in acting. This is how we “take the helm in our life’s journey”; it’s what makes us genuinely human.

“For the Sake of Love”

September 2010

In its June 11th issue, Newsweek magazine published an article entitled “ ‘I Don’t’—The case against marriage”. The bottom-line: it makes little sense and is neither practical nor possible to commit oneself to a spouse in marriage. I was reading the article in a train on my way from Paris to London, where I was to preside at the final profession of one of our young brothers, Nguyen Kuong Dhuy. Of course, the article made me rethink what I would tell Dhuy during my homily as he was about to say “I do!” As it turns out, what I did say strikes me as so important that I’ve chosen to repeat it in this editorial. I do so in light of the real difficulty of making such commitments in today’s culture. For almost twelve years now, I have grappled with this question and once again want to say what I believe to be most important in our vocation as Christians and as religious.

For me, the bottom line is clear: **if we do not commit ourselves as Christians or as religious for the sake of love, then we shouldn’t do it!**

Religious

certainly shouldn’t do it for the sake of

power

. “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely!” But we didn’t need Lord Acton (who spoke the words in 1887 to a Bishop!) to remind us of that. The Gospel already says it clearly: “The rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them... It shall not be so among you.” (Matthew 20:25–26) We know the dangers of power, of arbitrariness, and of secrecy, both in our societies as well as in our Church. No, our Christian commitment cannot be in view of acquiring power.

Nor can it be in view of acquiring **prestige**. Religious life does not upgrade us to first class status; all baptized Christians are called to holiness. The spirit of the three so-called Evangelical counsels (poverty, chastity and obedience) is for all Christians. A priest or a religious does not have a higher status because of his or her commitment.

And, though this might not be readily apparent, I do not believe that we should say “I do” for the sake of **philanthropy** or generous service to humanity. Clearly, service is important in the life of every disciple of Jesus: “The son of man came not to be served, but to serve.” (Matthew 20:28) But does one need to be a religious (or for that matter, a Christian) to be dedicated to the service of humankind?

I seem to agree with the author of the Newsweek article; there are many reasons not to say “I

do!” But I come back to my main point: we can say “I do!” if it is for the sake of love. And here I would like to write a few words especially for religious. Strictly speaking, as I suggested earlier, it is not the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience that distinguishes them from other Christians, but one of their commitments does: the commitment to a celibate life in community.

Perhaps it is ironic, but religious choose to remain celibate for the sake of love! They choose to pursue just one “love affair” if I can call it that, their relationship with Jesus Christ. In many different ways, during their life, they have been touched by Jesus Christ, in the love they’ve experienced in their families, through their friends, from their teachers; during a special moment of prayer or from a word in the Scriptures; through a service-project that challenged them. And then they chose to surrender everything (home, possessions, family, independence) in order to give their life over entirely to Jesus Christ, as the “one thing necessary” (Jesus’ words to Martha in Luke 10:41–42). This love, they’ve decided, can fill their hearts and make their lives fruitful.

But this choice does not narrow their horizons since religious choose to live celibacy in community. Love of Jesus Christ is no private affair. It has a way of including the whole world, first very concretely in community for the rest of their life, and then with all of God’s people, with whom they share the love of God that they have experienced.

“For the sake of love!” Some foolish things can also be done “for the sake of love”! I’m not talking here about a passing sentiment, about “commitments” that do not last. Being a religious nowadays or for that matter being a Christian who takes the life of discipleship seriously is not easy. If our focus, however, remains fixed on the one for whom we have made this decision, the one who rose from the dead and is present in our hearts and in our world as a source of life, we can be confident that He will strengthen our resolve and give us peace and joy in this Christian journey on which we have embarked.

“Langue de bois”

December 2010

The French call it « langue de bois ». The phrase is not easy to translate, but it refers to a language that is spoken in every culture. It seems that the expression was invented in Russia to describe ideological discourse during the Soviet era. It is a term currently applied especially to politicians who use language to hide incompetence or to avoid answering questions they consider embarrassing. It is language that tends to be pompous, dull, wordy, vague, and banal.

At its worst, it is used to conceal or distort the truth.

Why do I evoke the phrase?

I'm currently reading the interview of Pope Benedict by Peter Seewald (Light of the World, whose French edition, I might add, was published by Bayard in Paris). I urge you all to read it. (If you have easy access to these texts, I also encourage you to read the wonderful "review" of the book written by Isabelle de Gaulmyn for the edition of La Croix published on November 22nd, as well as the presentation by L'Osservatore Romano in its November 21st

edition.) Although most newspapers focused almost exclusively on one comment made by the Pope (on the use of condoms by a prostitute infected with AIDS, chapter 11), the interview covers a wide range of topics, from the most anecdotal ("Does the Pope wears his white cassock all day long?" and "What are your favorite videos?") to the most substantial (on the nature of progress, on our capacity to know the truth, on the Church's relations with Muslims, Jews, Protestant and Orthodox Christians) and the most controversial (the Regensburg speech, sexual abuse by priests, the decision regarding Bishop Williamson, celibacy and a married clergy, the ordination of women, hotly debated Church teachings in a variety of areas...).

What I want to point out in a special way is the Pope's aversion to a "langue de bois". Nowhere in the 200-page interview will you find language that is "pompous, dull, wordy, vague, and banal". The Pope's language is direct, simple, honest, and courageous. He is optimistic about the Church in today's world ("I am quite optimistic that Christianity is on the verge of a new dynamic." Ch. 5), but he warns against any kind of triumphalism or activism. In fact, the reader is struck by the Pope's humility: besides the great popes, he says, there are the little ones who give what they can (chapter 7). Benedict is even modest regarding our ability to know what's true: "The concept of the truth...has been much abused. Intolerance and cruelty have occurred in the name of truth... We never have the truth; at best it has us. No one will dispute that we must be careful and cautious in claiming the truth." (chapter 5)

But in the end, it's the Pope's conviction that only the truth and God's Word can give meaning and direction to our lives. Consequently, he avoids any kind of language that obscures the truth or any ideology that pretends to take God's place at the center of our lives or thought.

The Pope also had some good things to say about the new evangelization that is needed today. If such an effort is to be effective, we had best learn to speak the right language, a language

that the Pope speaks fluently. I was reminded of this while reading the self-evaluation that one of our confrères wrote in view of his ordination: “One day, in a catechism class I was teaching, a little girl said to me: “Your explication doesn’t make any sense!’ Her remark made me think about the need for a catechesis that is more developed, closer to the reality that children experience in school and at home and not a catechism ‘that rains down from heaven and whose waters never penetrate.’” His reflection made me think of the countless sermons I’ve heard that are dull and wordy and have no unifying thought and absolutely no relevance to the challenges with which I am faced each day. Preachers too readily communicate in a “langue de bois”.

And it is not simply a matter of language or of style. More importantly, it is a matter of respect for the truth. No one would question the Pope’s faith and attachment to the Church, but he is no ideologue. He acknowledges that sin exists in the Church and recognizes that he too is a pilgrim along the way, but the only thing that will allow us to see clearly in order to arrive at our destination is to open ourselves to the light of the truth... the truth, I might add, that took flesh in the one whose birth we are celebrating.

“On this rock...”

March 2011

During the recent inter-Assumption workshop on the charism, the participants spent part of an afternoon visiting the necropolis under Saint Peter’s basilica here in Rome. It seemed like an appropriate thing to do, given the fact that the aspect of the charism we were studying was the love of the Church, so central to the faith of our founders.

We concluded the visit on that spot, beneath the basilica, where it is believed the Apostle was buried. We could see a small cluster of bones...and in our imagination the huge, triumphant baroque structure rising directly above them. The contrast between the poor remains of a simple fisherman and the history and splendor piled on top of him in his memory and honor could not be more dramatic. But it is “on this rock” that the whole dwelling rests.

And what is this rock? It is a man of humble origins, with nothing in his life to prepare him for a world-wide mission, with a temperament that had its qualities but also its defects, and with a loyalty to his teacher that was far from perfect. It is also and perhaps especially a man on whom the experience of his teacher’s faithful loving mercy left an indelible mark, a memory that no doubt sustained him right to the end, right to the day when he was crucified just a few meters

away from the spot where his bones now rest.

We're tempted, every day, in praise or in blame to focus our attention on the "triumphant baroque structure" that is the Church, or the power or the strength or the riches that we may possess. All those riches are surely more consoling and reassuring than our fundamentally very modest and limited resources.

But are they our real wealth? It's rather on that small clump of bones that the Church really rests, on the faith of Peter. Peter's limitations and doubt made him rely that much more on the one who gave real meaning to his life and filled him with energy in his service. You may be inclined to revel in the splendor of the upstairs basilica at St. Peter's; the visit in the underground necropolis is a bit creepy. But there's a powerful truth waiting to be discovered in those depths.

There's no more important invitation I can extend to all of you, as I pen this last editorial at the end of my service to the Assumption as Superior General.

Finally, a word of thanks to all of you who have been faithful readers during these past twelve years. If what I have written has been useful, it is because you have taken the advice that Saint Augustine gave to his readers: "I cannot prove to you that my words are true, but those will believe me whose ears charity has opened to me."

Notes

[1] The French word "projet" conveys something that is not easily translated into other languages; for that reason I am not bothering to translate here into English. Even explanations given in French are not entirely consistent. At the Council of Congregation, we were more or less in agreement with a definition that is presented in the dossier with this issue, on the Council of Congregation.

[2] In that regard, we would do well to study a recent document of the Congregation for the

Doctrine of the Faith (24 November 2002) on “The Participation of Catholics in Political Life.” While emphasizing the importance of respecting a certain pluralism in the political realm, the document underlines the responsibility of Christians to draw attention to fundamental ethical principles founded on the dignity of our human nature.

[3] He is careful to say that his “projet” is not a new “program”, for that already exists: to know, love and imitate Jesus Christ and to transform history with him (par. 29). But it is necessary “to translate this program into pastoral orientations adapted to the circumstances of each community.” To help in this effort, the Holy Father wanted to propose certain pastoral priorities for the entire Church.

[4] In the review *Bonne nouvelle*, n° 184, mars-avril 2009, p. 5.