



“...In one body”

Assumption's Ecumenical Mission

LETTER of the Superior General

A letter addressed to

*...the Committee of the Congregation for the Mission in the Orient,¹
...Father Benoît Grière, the Provincial of France, who is first
responsible for the Mission,
...Father Bernard Leleannec, the delegate of the Provincial for the
Mission,
...all of our brothers and sisters currently serving in the
communities of the Orient,
...all Assumptionists, for whom this mission is an essential part of
their religious identity
...all Oblate sisters (with the permission of their Superior General)*

The story is told that Vladimir, the prince of Kiev, dissatisfied with pagan beliefs, sent emissaries abroad to investigate the claims of other faiths. These returned to their ruler with the message that it was only in the church of Holy Wisdom (Hagia Sophia) in Constantinople (and in no other place of worship), that they found both joy and beauty: “We couldn’t tell if we were in heaven or on earth. There is nowhere else that can be found such beauty and such splendor.” We might not agree with their impressions, but their testimony helps us understand that for the faithful of the East joy, splendor, and beauty are essential to the Christian experience.

If the tradition of the Eastern Church is so important to Benedict XVI it is mainly because it highlights a dimension of the Christian mystery

¹ The phrase in French “Mission d’Orient” cannot be easily translated into English. “Orient” here refers to the cultural/religious reality of the non-Latin Christian world. At times, the word “East” or “eastern” is used.

of which all followers of Jesus Christ should be aware.² The genius of the Greek and Slavic traditions complement the genius of the Latin tradition. Without this dimension, the Western Church would be greatly impoverished.

Father d'Alzon, who as a young man had already studied the writings of the Church Fathers of both the East and the West, must have shared some of this same conviction. Consequently, he would have had little difficulty understanding and even welcoming the somewhat mysterious declaration made to him by Pius IX on 6 June 1862.

Up to the beginning of the First World War, the presence of the Assumption in the Orient was thriving. And, even during the Communist regime, a good number of confreres pursued their Gospel mission in Moscow, in Bulgaria, in Romania and in Yugoslavia. And in the West, intellectual research continued unabated in the Institutes of Byzantine Studies in Paris, Nijmegen and Athens, thanks to a number of Assumptionist researchers, who greatly contributed to our knowledge of the Eastern Churches. But after the fall of Communism, with the beatification of our brother-martyrs in Plovdiv, and inspired by the teaching given to the whole Church by Pope John Paul II, we have taken a number of initiatives to refocus our attention on our ecumenical mission in the Orient.

A new resolve

Since the time of Fr. d'Alzon, our works in the Orient have been of considerable importance. More recently, it is especially thanks to the Province of France that this flame has been kept burning. The Province has taken a number of initiatives to encourage the brothers working in the mission. At the level of the Congregation as a whole, a

² See his speech on the occasion of the celebration of the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom for the feast of Saint Andrew, in the Patriarchal church of Saint George, Istanbul, 30 November 2006.

new interest is being awakened. We recall the important colloquium held in Rome in 1997 on one of the founding figures of that mission, Bishop Petit³ and the “Orient Retreats” initiated shortly after, as well as the colloquium on the Assumption in Russia held in Rome in 2003.⁴ We remember the gathering in Istanbul in 2002 of all the Council of Congregation, which with the Superior General of the Oblate Sisters, and our confrere Bishop Louis-Armel Pelâtre, the Apostolic Vicar of Istanbul, met with the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomeos I, who vigorously urged us to stay in Istanbul and pursue our ecumenical mission.⁵ That meeting led to an appeal, by Sister Claire and myself, to all the sisters and brothers of our two Congregations for help in our mission. At least eight brothers indicated an openness to this possibility. The Executive Committee, created by the Council of Congregation in 2004, focused on three major dossiers, one of which was our Ecumenical Mission in the East and produced a number of reflection papers that provide important insights as we continued to reflect on this topic.⁶ In another vein, an internet site on the Mission (www.assomptionorient.altervista.org), launched by the community in Plovdiv, has made the mission known to a wider public. Finally, the General Chapter of 2005 adopted this Mission as the first of three priorities for the entire Congregation: “The Mission in Eastern Europe (‘Mission d’Orient’) is an essential component of the missionary and ecumenical thrust of the Church. Benedict XVI

³ *Mgr Petit, Assomptionniste, Fondateur des “Échos d’Orient”, Archevêque latin d’Athènes – Actes du Colloque, Rome, 15-17 décembre 1997*, Rome 2002.

⁴ *Les Assomptionnistes et la Russie 1903-2003 – Actes du Colloque d’Histoire, Rome, 20-22 novembre 2003*, Rome 2004.

⁵ See the Address of the Superior General to His Beatitude, Bartholomeos I, Archbishop of Constantinople and the Ecumenical Patriarch, 4 April 2002, in *Documents-Assomption #27*, Rome, 2002, pp. 43-45.

⁶ See working papers prepared by Fr. André Antoni and myself.

reaffirmed it as a priority for the Catholic Church.⁷... [It] is a heritage we have received. The ‘Mission d’Orient’ gave the Congregation its first beatified members. They encourage us to make it bear fruit.” (#46 et #48)

Since the Chapter, we have seen the Pope act on his resolve to draw closer to the Church in the East through his visit to Istanbul, his meeting in Rome with Archbishop Christodopoulos of Athens and of all Greece (14 December 2006), and various efforts to re-establish contact with the Patriarch of Moscow. Indeed, in Istanbul, he repeated in other words, his resolve made in April of 2005: all Christians should put “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.” (Homily at the Cathedral of the Holy Spirit, Istanbul, 1 December 2006)

Now, to support the efforts of the Province of France, it seemed important to renew our effort to animate the entire Congregation around this Chapter priority. With due respect for the competence and experience of Provincial leadership, who are much more aware of the ins and outs of this very complex mission, I would like to share some thoughts and suggestions, whose advantage is that they are inspired by a Congregational perspective on the question.

Father d’Alzon’s “vision”; Father Galabert’s “reality”

When Father d’Alzon went to the Vatican on the morning of 6 June 1862, a mission in Bulgaria was the furthest thing from his mind; he was thinking instead of Jerusalem and Syria. But Father d’Alzon took all of this seriously; he believed that God’s will had somehow been

⁷ See the speech of Benedict XVI the morning after his election (20 April 2005): “Nourished and sustained by the Eucharist, Catholics cannot but feel encouraged to strive for the full unity for which Christ expressed so ardent a hope in the Upper Room... With full awareness, therefore, at the beginning of his ministry in the Church of Rome which Peter bathed in his blood, Peter’s current Successor takes on as his primary task the duty to work tirelessly to rebuild the full and visible unity of all Christ’s followers.”

manifested, even if not very clearly, in those cryptic words of the Holy Father. In his own mind, this was a call to work for the restoration of full unity between the East and the West.⁸ This would come about by working for the “conversion” of the Orthodox to the Catholic faith, supporting first of all the “uniates”, those Orthodox who had already entered into the Catholic Church. This was Father d’Alzon’s vision and his first thoughts regarding the strategies for realizing that vision.

But Father d’Alzon knew nothing of the realities to be faced in Eastern Europe. To confront these realities and thereby give flesh to his vision, he brought the question to the attention of the members of the General Chapter of September 1862, at which time Father Victorin Galabert volunteered for the mission. To give flesh to his vision, Father d’Alzon readily entrusted it to this confrere in whom he had great confidence. Shortly thereafter, Father Galabert left for Constantinople, on 1 December 1862. And in order to accompany him with at least some first-hand knowledge, Father d’Alzon himself spent time in Constantinople in (from 21 February to 16 April 1863).⁹

My purpose is not to analyze Father d’Alzon’s vision or his discoveries during his stay in Turkey, but to insist on two essential dimensions of any apostolic initiative. A Gospel mission is driven by vision and by reality. Both must be respected, which creates a tension that is meant to be fruitful. **Vision** calls us to something that beyond

⁸ In the letters he sent from Constantinople, among a great number of very mundane considerations (finances, parcels of land, some of the less appealing sides of the local population), Father d’Alzon never lost sight of the ultimate goal he wanted to pursue, namely, the renewal of the Orient (see his letter of 5 March 1863): “[We need] to renew the strength and the life of these people.” (26 February 1863); “The Church or the Revolution? That is the real debate.” (5 March 1863); “What amends must we not make to Our Lord for the insults that he has received in these countries?” (24 February 1863); “Sooner or later, we must be an end to this Photian intrigue.” (11 March 1863); “There is good to be done all over... An infinite amount of good to be done... Oh, what a battle is to be engaged!” (2 April 1863).

⁹ Father d’Alzon wrote over sixty letters during his stay in Constantinople, as well as an extensive report submitted to the Pope upon his return.

ourselves and our current necessarily limited perspectives; it is what fires our apostolic ambitions and sustains us in the face of setbacks and opposition. It is what sustains men who are faced with persecution and martyrdom. **Reality** obliges us to be attentive to the real needs of human beings and the unexpected opportunities that we could not have imagined. The real world in which we live is the one that God gives us to love.

Our “reality” today

It might seem that the glorious period of the Assumptionist mission in the East has passed. Communism had a role to play in that decline, although we can think of other reasons as well. What has been called a “mobilizing myth” is no longer mobilizing many religious to give their lives for the mission in the East. A number of brothers and sisters constitute a faithful remnant still at work in the Orient, now more focused on the immediate and very varied needs of the local populations: parish ministry, social works, catechesis, vocation ministry, school chaplaincies, work among immigrants. We have communities in Romania, Bulgaria, Istanbul, Jerusalem, Moscow and Athens. We retain some contact with the Eastern Churches in these places, as well as with the Muslim population in Istanbul. Whatever mission the Lord entrusts to us today in the East, it will be different the “glorious” past, and it will be modest, but how might it still remain faithful to the vision that Father d’Alzon had almost a century and a half ago?

The call and a “vision” for today

While we have to be attentive to today’s reality and very specifically to be solicitous for our brothers and sisters hard at work in various apostolates in the Orient, it is crucial that we rekindle some of the fire that led Father d’Alzon to commit his meager resources to a mission about which he knew and understood very little. The “call” seems clear. It comes from the second Vatican Council and more recently

from Pope John Paul II and now Pope Benedict XVI. It comes too from the Ecumenical Patriarch himself. And the call comes from the fact that we as Congregations were founded in good part for this mission. With a century and a half of experience, we are recognized in the Church, both East and West, as “experts” in the field. It is not false pride to say that few Congregations have a richer theological and pastoral experience in the domain of Catholic-Orthodox affairs.

Formulating a “vision” for today, so that we have some rudder to guide us in managing the “reality” of today, should begin from this call. It is not a call to a place, the East and Near East, but to a cause: the hope expressed by Jesus in the Cenacle (see John 21), the ecumenical cause, the “full and visible unity of all Christ’s followers” (as Pope Benedict puts it), and particularly with regard to the Church of the Orient.

A realistic strategy for realizing this vision

Given our resources (greater than what Father d’Alzon had at hand, but meager nonetheless), we cannot do everything at once, and we may not be able to do everything we are currently doing in all of the places where we currently working. We need to make choices, today and for the long-term, decisions today oriented toward long-term objectives.¹⁰

If we are clear about and committed to a common vision, namely the ecumenical cause vis-à-vis the Church of the East (as articulated above), then I find that the project for Bucharest that the Province of France has been contemplating for some time now is the project

¹⁰ In this regard, we should follow Fr. d’Alzon’s example. He went to Constantinople with the intention of purchasing the Cenacle; in a letter to M. Marie-Eugénie, he tries to convince her as well to purchase the house of the Dormition. Gradually, as he studied the dossier of the Orient, Fr. d’Alzon surrendered this dream that was so close to his heart. (see letters of 5 March and 17 March 1863)

behind which we must invest our greatest energies and resources. What I have understood of this project impresses me with its modesty and with its realism, but also with its promise and with its potentially important impact not only locally but on the entire Assumptionist mission in Eastern Europe. It is a very concrete project, a precise strategy, but one inspired by the broader vision. It would allow the Assumption to be present in an important and explicit way in the Orthodox world.

The project entails the re-founding of an Assumptionist community in the building in Bucharest (Christian Tell street) built by the Congregation in 1936. The intention would be to create an ecumenical center, and house the very rich ecumenical library of the French Institute of Byzantine Studies. When I first heard of the project, I thought of the ecumenical community of Enzo Bianchi in Bose (Italy) and could easily imagine a similar community in Bucharest, of Assumptionist inspiration, even with Catholic and Orthodox members. The community would be our first mission, with a strong emphasis on fraternal life (the best “strategy” for the ecumenical mission) and on a life of common prayer at once open to visitors, beautiful, and inspired by our sister Christian traditions. Also, the brothers, depending on their own training and charisms, could also be involved in ecumenical study, teaching and research, as well as in pastoral and social endeavors with other Christians.¹¹

In insisting on this one project, I seem to have overlooked our other communities in the East. That was deliberate because I think we will not make any progress if we insist on everything at once. But it is clear that a strong, renewed insistence on the ecumenical mission in a

¹¹ After three weeks of reflection in Constantinople, Fr. d’Alzon finally succeeded in concretizing his vision in terms that seem similar to the Bucharest project: “Pray God that I know what we should do. Of course, there would need to be a patriarchal seminary, as well as an apostolic and scholarly center. Well, that does seem to me to be one of the goals of our Congregation.” (16 march 1863)

substantial, vigorous community in Bucharest would at least indirectly be encouraging to our ecumenical efforts in Moscow, in Plovdiv, and in Romania. And concretely the brothers and sisters in Bucharest might provide a unifying center for all of the efforts of our various communities in the East. Clearly, more thought would have to be given to the relationship among all of these communities and to the plans that might be put in place for the future.

I have also said nothing about inter-religious dialogue, which along with ecumenism the General Chapter considered as one of the Congregation's five apostolic axes (see General Chapter, *Acts*, #12-14). That inter-religious dialogue is an urgent need today is beyond dispute; how can we not feel obliged to be attentive to this need? And yet realistically how should we respond? It is to be noted that in choosing the Mission of the Orient as the Congregation's first priority, it insisted on the ecumenical mission vis-à-vis the Orthodox Church. Perhaps this was an acknowledgement of the fact that as Assumptionists we have real expertise in this field, but we have only a very limited experience in the area of inter-religious dialogue. Perhaps in this regard we need to be realistic. In terms of apostolic planning, I suggest that we be very respectful of the charism of an individual religious who might feel called to specialize in this field and encourage him along those lines. But considering the advice proffered by the former president of the Pontifical Council on Inter-religious Dialogue, Bishop Michael Fitzgerald, we Assumptionists, with our experience, would do well to cooperate with the local Christian Churches in their efforts at dialogue with the Muslims. This would allow us to remain focused on our primary concern, namely relations with the Church of the East.

Finally, this strategy also says nothing about our mission in Jerusalem. This is a universal mission for the entire Congregation (and why not for the entire Assumption family?), which focuses primarily on the Word of God and the places where that Word

touched the earth and secondarily on relations with the Jewish, Orthodox and Muslim worlds present in the Holy Land.

Where do we go from here?

Without hesitation, the delegates at the General Chapter, representing our religious in every continent, voted to make our Mission in the Orient the first of the Congregation's three priorities. The religious currently at work in that mission were very happy with the decision, as was the Province of France, who is primarily entrusted with the accompaniment of the mission. But the Chapter chose this as a priority for the *entire* Congregation. For those who are not in Eastern Europe or responsible for that mission and for those who are thousands of miles from any Orthodox church, what can this priority possibly mean, especially when needs closer to home are so pressing?

While we sense the importance of being deeply rooted in our own cultures and our local Churches (the "many gifts" to which the Chapter's theme alludes), the Chapter members were also aware of the need to move beyond cultural boundaries and local interests (see *Acts*, #123) in order to stretch our experience and grow in understanding of different traditions and ways of understanding the world (the "one body" of the Chapter theme). Giving globalization a human face is a way toward greater peace and harmony among cultures.

It is in that spirit that the priority of our mission in Eastern Europe can be embraced even by those for whom this is not part of their daily experience or their usual apostolic program. For Christians, we are impelled by an additional motive. It is communicated visually by the image of the apostles Peter and Andrew embracing. These apostles symbolize the two founding traditions of the Christian faith, the Western and the Eastern. I see yet another image each time I enter the basilica of Saint Peter. The "climax"

of one's walk down the nave of that church is the brilliant window of the Holy Spirit that hovers above the symbolic throne of Peter. This throne is supported by four fathers of the Church: two from the West (Augustine and Ambrose) and two from the East (John Chrysostom and Athanasius). Two images that say clearly: two traditions are at the heart of our faith; we cannot be fully Christian unless we steep ourselves in these two founding traditions and in the history, theology, spirituality, art and music that embody these traditions.

Where do we go from here with this General Chapter priority? The **FIRST EFFORT** is to broaden our spiritual and theological culture in the Congregation to include not only those understandings closest to home and to our own cultures but also the "other" founding tradition of our Christian faith, that of the East. This tradition is already a part of our Assumptionist identity and history, but we need to go further. How can we bring this about?

- Already during their initial formation in **novitiate**, our religious should be introduced to the history of our mission in the East (see Chapter *Acts*, #57). This means that formators will have to study this history in order to communicate it in terms that the novices will understand. The General Council has organized a team of people that will soon produce a brochure on this mission and make it available in the official languages of the Congregation. It will provide a bibliography of books and articles, mostly in French, that formators will be able to use for their own preparation. I invite them to complete this bibliography with books in languages that might be more accessible to the novices.
- During the years of **theological formation**, whenever it is possible, young Assumptionists should favor studies of both Augustine and Chrysostom and other Church Fathers from both traditions. They should be encouraged to study theological questions that allow them to deepen their understanding and

appreciation of these traditions and contemporary ecumenical questions.

- The General Council is currently organizing **an international formation session** (the first will be in Plovdiv in August/September 2007), broadly open to the religious of the Congregation and to the Oblate sisters, to provide a basic introduction to the Eastern Churches and the contemporary ecumenical picture (see Chapter *Acts*, #59).
- Every local community can make this presence of the East “felt” in very concrete ways: by reserving a special place for icons on the walls of their chapels and residences (these could be the opportunity for explaining to visitors who might be surprised the significance of the Eastern Churches for the Assumption), by gathering a small library of basic reference books on the Orthodox Church, by organizing celebrations important in the Eastern liturgical calendar and marking in a special way the feast of our brother martyrs on 13 November. (The proper for that feast is currently making its way through Vatican channels.)

The **SECOND EFFORT** for promoting this Chapter priority is to support the foundation of an international community in Bucharest, as a first but very important step in revitalizing our entire mission in Eastern Europe. Supporting this foundation is not simply help to a Province unable to carry a mission on its own or a generous effort to meet the needs of the people of Romania. It is that, but much more. It is a first step in view of re-founding for this new era our ecumenical mission with the Eastern Church and our response to the renewed insistence of Popes John Paul II and Pope Benedict on this mission of the Church of Christ. Consider this letter a call once again addressed to all Assumptionists (and to the Oblate sisters, if I had the authority to make such a call), by the Superior General in conjunction with the Province of France, to think seriously about the role that you might play in founding this new community. The call is addressed to every Assumptionist, religious and lay: to those who can see themselves as part of this new community (for an extended period or for a time of

volunteer work) and to their Major Superiors, who will undoubtedly have some hesitations allowing any of their religious to move out of the vice/Province. It is a call to people with a heart for unity, with a longing for reconciliation and harmony among followers of Christ, with a desire to build peace at least in this one very specific part of the human family. It is a call to people with skills as pastors, as liturgists, as artists and musicians, as theologians, as managers and organizers, as brothers in community. There are few skills that would not be useful in building up such a community. If this is a great cause of the Church at this very moment, then I am confident that the Spirit will do His work in the hearts of some of you who are aware of my appeal.

The **THIRD EFFORT** to be made in support of this Chapter priority is for all of us to be sensitive to the attraction we might have for lending support to our other communities in Eastern Europe, especially in view of developing a contact with the Church of the Orient. Some of our communities present particular opportunities in this regard: Moscow of course, but also Plovdiv (Bulgaria), Blaj (Romania), Athens, and Istanbul. Very concretely, these communities could use help in responding to the request of the Chapter (*Acts #61*) to organize workshops or to preach retreats on the tradition and spirituality of the Orient. Again, the urgency of the appeal even for these communities is not because of the particular needs in a local Church (so many local Churches could make the same claim), but to contribute to the overall ecumenical mission that the Holy Father (as well as the Ecumenical Patriarch) has told us should be “at the forefront of our ecclesial concerns.”

Those of you who allow yourselves to consider, even remotely, contributing directly to this mission, please contact me or Father Benoît Grière, the Provincial of France, in order to pursue the reflection and discernment.

CONCLUSION

If I have addressed this letter in the first place to the Committee of the Congregation for the Mission in the Orient, to the Provincial of France, and to his delegate for the Mission, it is especially to thank them for carrying the concern for this mission so faithfully, so enthusiastically, and so creatively. They do not carry this concern alone, for the Chapter has made of this Mission a priority for the entire Congregation. The entire Congregation is now called to translate that priority into very specific decisions. With the Spirit's guidance and with the help of the Mother of God, the Assumption will remain faithful to the heritage it has received and renew its commitment to the cause of unity for which Jesus longed.

Richard E. Lamoureux, a.a.
Superior General

6 January 2007
Epiphany of the Lord