



The Assumption Charism

6-9 January 2009 - Rome

**“Human and spiritual experience
at the heart of the Assumption charism”**

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These were not the scholarly, researched efforts of an archivist or historian, even if the authors made an effort to be as faithful and objective as possible. They spoke more on the basis of knowledge they had already acquired and insisted on the human and spiritual experience of the founders/foundresses (i.e. by referring to historical events, they emphasized the impact of these events on the human and spiritual journey of the person).

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PREFACE

These five chapters have one goal: to be a reminder of the content and rich experience of the inter-Assumption meeting held in Rome from 6-9 January 2009. This abridged presentation of the program for the workshop shows how work unfolded over the four days.

THE PROCESS IN GENERAL:

An “objective” stage: the human and spiritual experience of the founders/foundresses

A more “subjective” stage: the human and spiritual experience of each participant

A stage for identifying the common elements of the Assumption charism

TUESDAY, 6 January: the human and spiritual experience of our founders/foundresses

The working method: a panel presentation by each Congregation; each Congregation has 50 minutes during which there was a principal presentation, additions by other members of the panel, and an exchange with the rest of the participants. The principal presentation addresses the following question: what human and spiritual experience(s) (events, reactions, character or psychological traits) of my founder is/are at the source of the charism of my Congregation?

-9am-1pm – three panels (RA, AA, OA)

-3pm-5pm – two final panels (LSA and OrA)

-5:30pm – Presentation by two “listeners” who made the effort during the day to listen carefully in order to note the “common elements” of the Assumption charism. This was followed by a general discussion.

WEDNESDAY, 7 January: the human and spiritual experience of each one

During the morning : “The Assumption in Rome” (in the footsteps of our founders in the city)

3:30pm – small group work, by Congregation

In the groups, each one addressed the following questions: In my development as an Assumptionist (or Oblate, or Orante, or Little Sister, of Religious) ...what has been my human and spiritual experience? What text of the founder/foundress or of my Congregation corresponds to this experience?

THURSDAY, 8 January: the human and spiritual experience of each one (continued)

9am-10am – Final preparation of a text to be shared with the full assembly

In sharing the results of their work, the groups noted the elements that are characteristic of the particular charism of the Congregation, which surfaced from the personal experiences that were shared; the group chose and presented the foundational text or texts that were presented the day before and that seem most striking.

10am-1pm and 3pm-5pm – General assembly: 3 groups present their texts

5pm-5:45pm – The listeners worked on their own

6pm-7pm – General assembly: the listeners presented the results of their work

FRIDAY, 9 January: The common elements

7:15am – Eucharist at Saint Peter’s (at the altar where Emmanuel d’Alzon celebrated his « first » Mass, 27 December 1834)

9:30am-11:30am – work in small, mixed groups (i.e. with members from different Congregations): what do we retain from what has been said up until now, what are the characteristics proper to each Congregation, and most of all what common elements enable us to speak a common Assumption language?

12pm – General assembly: the results of group work were shared

3pm-5:30pm – General assembly: the conclusions of our work

CHAPTER 1 – An inter-Assumption Gathering

Dear Assumption communities,

This is an overall view of what happened at our meeting in Rome. You have already received a first echo: “We were nineteen from the five Congregations of the Assumption Family for a session that took place at the Assumptionist General House on our shared Assumption charism.” Our objective? To talk about “Assumption.” And to do that, we sought to acquire a better understanding and appreciation of each other, to better define and live the Assumption charism, and to share a few ideas, intuitions, experiences, and foundational texts which inspire us today.

Our Assembly was not made up of specialists: what brought us together was the common desire to better know and understand each other.

The rereading of our foundational texts in the context of our respective personal experiences reminded us once again of how much our history is one and the same at the outset. The personal ties that united, at different periods in their lives, Marie Eugénie, Father d’Alzon, Marie Correnson, Father Pernet, Marie Antoinette Fage, Father Picard and Isabelle de Clermont Tonnerre were obvious and constantly kept up. These ties are reflected in the help they gave each other, especially in matters of formation and foundations. **Friendship** is the cement of our common history. One of the participants said: “They drank from the same spring.” Our common Sacred History continues, for we are presently experiencing that it is together that we fully manifest the Assumption charism.

Common roots and a common trunk have given us common attitudes and convictions. **Our language reflects this heritage:** the Incarnation, the Kingdom, the Church and society, an attachment to Christ, friendship, simplicity, family spirit, the Eucharist, Faith.

Our founders placed themselves with **passion** before God and at the service of the world of their time. They sought to develop a strong and committed faith made up of active trust and solidarity. They all experienced the fact that they were really and concretely linked to each other in the service of God and humanity. They found encouragement in their mutual support.

The rights of God and the rights of man came together in them, which gave them a sense of commitment for the good of all ... with a **zeal** that never faltered.

They wanted to give people a desire to commit themselves to the transformation of society by living the Gospel... They all considered **education** as a liberating force, a means by which people can develop and take responsibility for their own life and become involved in society.

Is this not prophetic in terms of the world of today, with its thirst for peace, justice and respect for life?

It was a pleasure talking about the **Kingdom** as the place where God who is at work – sometimes hidden, always discrete – allows himself to be discovered; where the poor reveal his face to us; and where we find bound together the Glory of God and the happiness of man. It was an invitation to be attentive to the “little things” in our daily life. As Jesus said: “The Kingdom is like leaven, like salt, like light, like a man going on a trip ...” We like helping each other to see “the sacred in our daily life.”

Frequenting the Gospel sharpens our outlook, and fraternal charity brings about this Kingdom which we are looking for, which we love, and in which we live. We are certain that it exists in our midst. One day, in Brazil, someone said to one of the sisters: “the Little Sisters of the Assumption are not only women of the Church but also women of the Kingdom!”

For each of our congregations, harmonizing our real insertion in the world with the withdrawal needed to nourish our personal love of Christ in a charitable community is a challenge. We raised the issue of the **indispensable visibility** of our communities and of our choices. Though each congregation has its own way of living, this is a renewed call springing from our barren deserts and addressed to everyone.

We found ourselves to be of one mind: **“To love and to help others to love the Church.”** Our experiences are different as well as our insertions when it comes to “re-giving a people to God” or to insisting on the fact that “we are Church.” As for our love of the **liturgy**, the attention we give it provides daily food for each of our families. It is yet another sign of our love for the Church and for what it offers us.

Together, let us mark out a path ...

We believe that the path is one of **conversion** so that we can live courageously the grace and the demands of our respective charisms. Doing so will help us to constantly rediscover the specificity of each of our congregations. And helping one another, in love and in mutual respect, will help us to be unique and needed members of the Assumption Family. This will mean leaving behind whatever preconceived ideas we might still have about others as well as forgiving them if need be. One of us applied to our religious families the pressing invitation of Christ “To love one another.”

This path of mutual recognition goes hand in hand with an effort to **recognize the work of God in our Congregations** as well as with the certitude that he leads us to where we know not but, nevertheless, “by Love and in Love,” as expressed by our Father Saint Augustine!

This path is the **responsibility of each member**: we need not wait for directives from our Superiors to invite each other, to find occasions for celebrations, for sharing, for praying, wherever we are located.

Finally, the path is a prophetic one, wherever it leads us. We don’t know precisely where, but we do know that it leads to Love!

The **methodology** we used during these days can be a useful tool for our communities: we looked for and shared a foundational text that we thought reflected the experience of our charism. This simple exchange provided us with a lot of joy; our convictions were reinforced; and our brotherhood strengthened.

We also feel the need to offer space for sharing and for brotherhood, space to express our communion and our Gospel solidarity. Spaces revealing our fraternal life can become for our contemporaries places that draw them to Christ. These ties which unite us can be signs of hope in the Church and in the world which long for unity.

It is difficult to overcome the feeling of helplessness in our world. We have come to better understand that God saves us in our weakness and that it suffices to walk humbly with our God,

To walk together,
To create space for communion,
“To walk humbly with our God.”

CHAPTER 2 – Five Major Presentations

RELIGIOUS OF THE ASSUMPTION

Sr. Regina Maria Cavalcanti, RA

INTRODUCTION

Our God is the source of all gifts. He is pleased to give us all kinds of graces. And he gives graces, tasks and special missions to certain people in view of a service to the community – these are charisms.

The expressions “charism of the founder” (or “of the foundress”) or even “of the Institute” are recent in the terminology of the Church. Paul VI is probably the first to have used this expression in an official document; it was his Apostolic Exhortation “*Evangelica Testificatio*” (ET 11). Before that, we often spoke of “the spirit”. “The spirit of the Assumption” is an expression that comes back often in the writings of Marie Eugénie. Today we would say “the charism of the Assumption”.

But how does the charism of a Congregation arise? There is no abstract way; it is first of all a gift, a grace, that God give to a specific person, called by Him with a mission to found a Congregation. This gift attracts other people who also sense a call and a desire to follow him/her. And so this gift, personal at first, become the gift, the charism of a group – of a Congregation.

Grace is grafted onto nature. This charism in fact takes root in the life experience of the founders. The family setting, the cultural and ecclesial context, the personal history and the faith story that are theirs, all of this enlightens and informs the grace received and transmitted by them in time, to the members of their Congregations.

In this presentation, we will try to see how our charism as Religious of the Assumption is marked by the human and spiritual experience of Marie Eugénie.

MARIE EUGENIE de JESUS – HUMAN AND SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

The life of Marie Eugénie spans almost the whole of the 19th century: from 1817 to 1898. To respect the time allotted to me, I will not attempt to sketch the entire social, political, cultural, economic and ecclesial context of the period. I refer you to the presentations at the Inter-Assumption Colloquium of 2004 on “The Origins of the Assumption Family.”

The human and spiritual experience of Marie Eugénie develops against this background, “an exciting century dominated in France by the event of the Revolution. A century with tremendous inventions. A century that was Voltairian, rationalist, locked in battle with the Church. A century where society and Church were in full evolution, lacking at times in models and rules; a century of debates, of adjustments and experimentations, but also of unresolved problems. ‘A century of confusion’, as it has been called. A century of struggles in which the laity was very much involved, when women exerted their influence and claimed

their rights. A century when the role of sin and the Papacy, as well as the theology of the sacrament of Holy Orders could not be under-estimated.”¹

Marie Eugénie underwent the effects of the French Revolution within her own family. Her father was Voltairian, and the education she received was not marked by the Christian faith, though she had in her mother the example of a strong women, honest, rich in human qualities.

Early on, she experiences total loss: her family, her possessions, and even her faith. It will take her a while to rediscover the faith, familiarity with God, and a meaning for her life. Let us listen to her own words, keeping in mind the language proper to her day:

“I was raised in an unbelieving family that belonged to the liberal opposition to the Restoration. My mother, however, wanted me to be Christian, and her great, upright character led her to give to my education a self-sacrificing character that always struck me as more Christian than many types of religious education. My ignorance of the dogmas and teachings of the Church was inconceivable, and yet like others I had received the usual catechetical instruction; I made my first communion with love, and God even gave me graces which, with your word, have been the basis of my salvation. I lost my mother when I was 15 years old and became even more irreligious. From then on I did not frequent the sacraments, where I had always felt God so strongly, though I rarely sought him out. The doubts that had always been on my mind became even stronger. I spent a few years wondering about the foundation and the consequences of these believes which I had never understood. Alone and free in my thinking, which was of interest to no one, I often asked myself what would become of all these beings, including myself, and if beyond the grave there would be something of us remaining, and especially what was the mystery, what was the duty of our existence here below.

“But God in his goodness still left a bond of love: I could doubt of the immortality of the soul, but I rejected involuntarily everything that attacked the sacrament of our altars, and with regard to the Church I saw the blessed host in the hands of the priest, and I prayed despite myself that it might make me pure like itself, and to draw me upwards.

“But all of my instruction, where Christ was not to be found, created by its very nature an invincible obstacle to these blessed attractions. Another change led me to some very pious women, and that was perhaps my greatest danger. They bored me, they seemed very narrow, and though while with them I started again to observe the Lenten confession, I never had a more worldly spirit and I was never closer to scorning God Himself.

“So it was, Father, that the mercy that ran after me led me below your pulpit. Since I had to follow a Lenten series, I chose yours. Grace was waiting for me. Your words answered all of my thoughts, they explained my instincts, they filled out my understanding of things, they revived in me the idea of duty, the desire for the good about to disappear from my soul; they instilled a new generosity within me, a faith that nothing would again make waver.”²

And so let us follow Marie Eugénie in this process that she herself describes. This letter is a re-reading of her journey. Her human and spiritual experience—these can’t be separated—is described in great detail.

¹ Holzer, Bernard, AA, « Enjeux d’un Colloque », in « Les Origines de la Famille de l’Assomption », Collection Recherches Assomption n° 3, pg. 8, Bayard, 2005.

² Marie Eugénie de Jésus, letter to P. Lacordaire of 13/12/1841, vol. VI, n° 1501

We see the adventure of a young woman who at 19 years of age takes the major step of conversion. This life experience had consequences that marked her, like the facets of a spirituality that developed during her lifetime and shaped a certain way of being and of acting that she transmitted to her sisters in the Congregation.

For example:

- The sense that the non-Christian society in which she lived and the education that she received, without reference to faith, awakened in Marie Eugénie the desire to make Jesus Christ known
- The influence of her mother that helped her discover the natural virtues;
- All of the separation and loss she experienced (the loss of material possessions at the time of her father's bankruptcy; separation from her parents; separation also from her brother, Louis, whom his father took with him when he divorced his wife; the death of her mother) taught her something about detachment that she would later call "dégagement", and which she will consider one of the aspects of the mystery of the Assumption;
- The experience of lack of religious spirit and of narrow piety that characterized the families with which she lived led her to a crisis of faith, and this crisis enabled her to discover the mercy of God and to learn first-hand about the search for truth;
- Her conversion helped her discover the value of the faith and the desire to transmit it, as well as the need to christianize intelligences.

All of these ways by which Marie Eugénie was marked by life are important for what she would later call "the spirit of the Assumption", which she will later try to explain to the sisters by a series of Chapter instructions.

I would however like to limit myself here to four major traits of our charism and to tie their roots to the life of Marie Eugénie, allowing the other sisters of our delegation to develop other aspects. These traits are:

- Christocentrism
- Passion for the Kingdom
- Love of the Church
- The place of Mary

Three of these traits are what Marie Eugénie calls "the three loves" that should be found in the heart of a Religious Sister of the Assumption: "Jesus Christ, the blessed Virgin, the Church."³ Her passion for the Reign will be manifested by the fact that at the beginning of the Congregation, the Sisters made a "fourth vow", to extend the Reign of Christ. Evidently, these aspects are intertwined. Marie Eugénie would not separate them.

a) Christocentrism

After having such a strong experience of conversion, Marie Eugénie gives herself over totally to a spiritual adventure that she will never abandon. The grace of her first communion, which had been asleep, you might say, during her adolescent years, comes back powerfully. It is at that time (she was ten years old) that she made a number of spiritual discoveries whose importance she would only understand at a later time: the greatness of God and at the same time the possibility of being close to him; the attitude of adoration; the mystery of the Church; the love of the Eucharist; the first call of God. She turns her eyes to Jesus Christ; they will never leave him after that. She will later say.

³ Marie Eugénie de Jésus, Chapter Instruction of 05/05/1878.

“Today, I don’t know how to articulate it, for this is precisely where the life of the Congregation is situated. The love of Jesus Christ and of his Church is its principal character...

“To know our Lord and to reproduce his divine image within us, you need to draw close to him and follow him. I remember that in my youth, I was made to copy a bust of Sixtus V from five or six different angles, such that I came to know Sixtus V by heart. But I found that totally useless, whereas we need to hold the Lord in our minds in order to “copy” his different traits”.⁴

Marie Eugénie adds : “...for our project, everything is from Jesus Christ, everything belongs to Jesus Christ, everything should be for Jesus Christ.”⁵

Marie Eugénie must have read and studied a great deal, under the guidance of Abbé Combalot. She develops a theological language to speak of the centrality of Jesus Christ in the life of the Sisters of the Assumption: it is what she calls “honoring the mystery of the Incarnation”. Listen to what she has to say:

“We are not yet fully established in a way that enables me to articulate our goal the way I understand it: a contemplative life, enlightened by religious study, the principle of an active life of faith, of zeal, of freedom of spirit. For me, the true aim, the distinctive trait of a project is found in an interior consecration to one or the other divine mystery, with respect to which everything is a continual homage. I believe that we are called to honor the mystery of the Incarnation and the sacred person of Jesus Christ, as well as an adherence to the most blessed Virgin to Jesus Christ. This is precisely what even dominates our thinking about education.”⁶

“The Incarnation is the mystery to which they should have a special devotion, since it is in this mystery that all things human are divinized and have their fulfillment.”⁷

From this theological and mystical vision of things flows a positive assessment of human reality, of all earthly realities, which become signs of the loving presence of God. The Earth becomes, for Marie Eugénie, “a place of glory for God.”⁸ From this also comes respect for each person and for his “path”, whether that be in education or in formation for religious life.

Marie Eugénie had a very strong spiritual experience along these lines:

“During my retreat on this day of the Annunciation, my God, I renew all of the vows that I have made. With the hope and the firm desire that you have planted in my heart, I offer myself to you to depend on and belong to your sacred incarnation. Following upon the incarnation and to extend it, if I may say so, I give myself to those mysteries to which you want me to dedicate myself. To the extent that I can and may, I vow myself, I give and consecrate myself, I submit myself to Jesus Christ, my Lord, so that everything in me render homage to his divinity.”⁹

This call to honor the mystery of the Incarnation, which Marie Eugénie senses will be a call for the whole Congregation, is very strong among us. It is a tradition in the Congregation that, during the novitiate, the sisters emphasize Christology in a special way.

b) Passion for the Reign

⁴ Marie Eugénie de Jésus, Chapter Instruction of 10/03/1878.

⁵ Marie Eugénie de Jésus, Chapter Instruction of 02/05/1878.

⁶ Marie Eugénie de Jésus, letter to P. d’Alzon, of 27/08/1843, n° 1590.

⁷ Marie Eugénie de Jésus, letter to P. d’Alzon, of 12/09/1843.

⁸ Marie Eugénie de Jésus, letter to P. Lacordaire, no date, in « Textes Fondateurs », pg.117.

⁹ Marie Eugénie de Jésus, “Notes Intimes », n° 188/01, of 25/03/1843.

From a very young age, Marie Eugénie manifested an open mind and a special interest in politics, in the broad meaning of the word. In 1819, her father was elected Counsellor General of the Moselle region; he had many friends in politics. As she herself wrote in the passage we read at the beginning of this presentation, her family belonged “to the liberal opposition to the Restoration”. Her mother was a woman who thought a great deal about the situation and had her own ideas. Marie Eugénie no doubt heard many conversations at home regarding the situation in which the country and the world found themselves. She will later say:

“I can tell you that for sure three minds had a fruitful influence on me that I still feel: my mother, and then two men for whom I had feelings that I spoke to you about before... What I liked passionately about them was the social mission I believed was theirs, the thought that at least in my mind they represented and championed... These two minds I still think were quite eminent, as well as that of my mother. They were fervent democrats, not for the futile details of the politics of the day in which I’m unable to be seriously interested, but for the future, for the destiny, the moral nobility of our country.”¹⁰

Marie Eugénie read a great deal, and I find among authors whose vision was open and turned to the future, an echo of her own thoughts and sentiments:

“And so for a year my heart would beat at hearing the names of my contemporaries, famous defenders of the Faith, La Mennais before his fall, Lacordaire, Montalembert, and all the others.”¹¹

“Just yesterday they brought me a copy of “Voix de Prison”, by M. de La Mannais. There is more than one thing, as you know, that made my heart beat upon opening this small volume, but with more serenity. It is impossible, fundamentally, for the earthly regeneration of humankind and of social law to come from anything other than the Word of Jesus Christ.”¹²

Marie Eugénie was very familiar with French society of her day, a society that had become anticlerical and not very Christian, as a result of the French Revolution. And she saw the beginning of social oppression, a consequence of the Industrial Revolution, which ended up creating the working class. Her contemplative consideration of this reality led her to dream of another type of society, transformed in the light of the social implications of the Gospel. She imagines “a social state...where the Christian principle would work to set aside the oppression of people by each other.”¹³

“I find it hard to hear anyone call the earth a place of exile; I see it as a place of glory for God, since He can receive from our free and suffering wills the only homage that He cannot find in Himself. I believe that we are placed here below precisely to work for the coming of the Reign of our heavenly Father on us and on others...

“Can you image the beauty of a society truly Christian? God, master of all spirits... though invisible reigning everywhere.”¹⁴

The study of St. Thomas and of the Fathers of the Church that Marie Eugénie did under the direction of Abbé Combalot, as well as her own life of prayer, allowed her to discover the great passion of her heart: the Reign of God. She discovers that this reign is not to be sought simply at the social level, but also at the interior level: what she calls the reign “over us and over others.” In her writings, the texts on this passion for the reign are numerous. I quote only a few:

¹⁰ Marie Eugénie de Jésus, letter to P. d’Alzon, of 12/03 /1844, vol. VIII, n°1610.

¹¹ Marie Eugénie de Jésus, “Notes Intimes”, n° 154/10, of 1837.

¹² Marie Eugénie de Jésus, letter to P. d’Alzon of 15/03/1844, vol.VIII, n° 1611.

¹³ Marie Eugénie de Jésus, letter to P. d’Alzon of 20/03/1853

¹⁴ Marie Eugénie de Jésus, letter to P. Lacordaire, no date, in « Textes Fondateurs », pg. 117.

“In any event, to doubt that the reign of Jesus Christ is the goal of the whole world and that it is good to devote oneself to this aim, who would dare doubt it?”

“To make known Jesus Christ, the liberator and king of the world; to teach that everything is his, that present in our lives by grace he wants to work for the great cause of the reign of God; to teach that each of us enters into his plan, to pray, to suffer, to act; to teach that to refuse him, for whatever reason, is to abandon the greatest good of all and to follow the path of egoism. I acknowledge that for me this is the beginning and the end of all Christian teaching...”

“...My focus...is entirely on Jesus Christ and the extension of his reign.”¹⁵

This “passion” so strong in the Congregation is what explains that as of 1844 it is the object of the fourth vow.¹⁶ In 1866, when the Institute is approved, Rome asked that it be set aside. When the next version of the Constitutions was drafted, in 1888, the expression “to work through their whole life for the extension of the reign of the Savior in souls” is incorporated into chapter 1, “The Goal of the Institute”.

c) Love of the Church

At the time of her first communion, as was already mentioned, Marie Eugénie had a revelation of grace, a profound experience of God, which because of her youth she did not understand at the time. Much later, she comes back to this experience and tells her sisters about it. It was her first call. She heard a voice that said to her:

“A day will come when you will leave everything that you love to glorify me and to serve this Church that you do not know.”¹⁷

Marie Eugénie had difficult experiences with some Churchmen: misunderstandings, contradictions, narrow views, jealousy, etc. This is what she says about this:

“I did not know the members of this Church. During that period of intellectual renewal through the study of Christianity carried out under your guidance, I thought of them as apostles, but later would see them as men. That is the source, dear father, of the bitterness and discouragement that torment me at times.”¹⁸

Despite these experiences, her faith perspective makes her feel that she is truly a daughter of the Church, to love the Church and make of this love a mark of our “spirit”. Perhaps she learned to love the Church in this way with Abbé Combalot, whose love for the Church is well known. Listen to her:

“How was our spirit, the first of our possessions, formed? The whole which we all understand and which is the character proper to our Institute: before all else, Jesus Christ, the King of eternity, living in souls and living in his Church, the extension of his reign within and around us...”¹⁹

“The second characteristic of the spirit of the Assumption is thus the love of the Church...”

“But our love should not stop at love for the Holy Father, the Pope; we must love the Church in her teaching, in her traits, her customs, her history, her traditions, her devotions; we should love her in all that she proposes to us, in what she was, in what she is today; we must love her in her hierarchy...”

¹⁵ Marie Eugénie de Jésus, letter to P. Lacordaire, no date, in « Textes Fondateurs », pp. 118 et 120.

¹⁶ Statutes of the Religious of the Assumption, presented to Rome in 1854, in « Textes Fondateurs » pg. 269.

¹⁷ Les Origines de l'Assomption - Souvenirs de Famille, volume I, chap. II

¹⁸ Marie Eugénie de Jésus, letter to P. Lacordaire, 13/12/1841, vol.VI, n° 1501

¹⁹ Marie Eugénie de Jésus, Chapter Instruction of 02/05/1884.

“How does the reign of our Lord Jesus Christ come about on earth? It is by the Church...

“I should add that this love of the Church makes us ardently desire that new members be added to the Church...”²⁰

This awareness of being a daughter of the Church and the desire to love “all of the customs and traditions” was a major force in making Marie Eugénie want the Divine Office, the prayer of the Church, for her Congregation. In speaking of “our spirit”, she even came to say: “There is nothing special in it; our spirit ought to make us desire to be rich in the spirit of the Church.”²¹

This is surely her love and her obedience toward the Church, together with her passion for the reign, that moved Marie Eugénie to respond to the requests of Bishops in far-away countries and to send her sisters to all five continents. In fact, early on, she sent sisters not only throughout Europe, but also in Africa (South Africa), in Oceania (New Caledonia), in Asia (Philippines) and in America (Nicaragua).

d) The place of Mary

Without a doubt, we owe our name to Abbé Combalot: “Assumption”. For a long time he has thought of founding a Congregation dedicated to the mystery of the Assumption and to the work of education young girls. He was inspired in this direction as a result of a pilgrimage to St. Anne d’Auray. What we know of his life reveals a man with a great love for Mary.

His first meeting with Marie Eugénie, in whom he found the one who could give form to the inspiration he had received, was a bit discouraging in this regard. This is what the story of our origins tells us, according to what Marie Eugénie herself told her sisters:

“Moved by an irresistible force, Eugénie often returned to Saint-Eustache to hear the preacher, and even decided to go speak with him about her desire to do something for God. He received her poorly: ‘Do you have a strong devotion to the Blessed Virgin?’, he asked. The young girl hesitated; her education had not encouraged in her this kind of Marian cult. ‘Not as much as I would like’, she responded softly. ‘Well, in that case, we can do nothing with you!’ ”²²

The knowledge and love of Mary were objects of spiritual growth for Marie Eugénie. Abbé Combalot, as we know, was the first one to have the inspiration of founding the Congregation, but he did not receive the grace of working at its foundation. His character, his instability, and his desire to control everything himself did not enable him to accompany the birth of the Congregation, a slow process requiring patience and perseverance in order to give shape slowly to the new religious family. But before the break, when he left the sisters, Abbé Combalot drafted a long text in which we see how he imagined the figure and presence of Mary in the Congregation:

“In making his noble Mother a type of the reborn woman, Jesus Christ wanted to gather around her all of those people so touched by his divine love that they would want to live in their mortal body with the purity of the Angels alone...

“...it so pleased her Son to bring together in her all the splendors of his own glory...

“We owe the truth to Mary, as we owe to her grace and life... she is the mother of the living truth, the Word made flesh.

²⁰ Marie Eugénie de Jésus, Chapter Instruction of 05/03/1878.

²¹ Marie Eugénie de Jésus, Chapter Instruction of 03/03/1878.

²² Les Origines de l’Assomption – Souvenirs de Famille, volume I, chap. III.

“In taking the name of daughters of the Assumption, you have no ambition other than to honor that great mystery and to consider it as the superhuman summary of the mission that you would like to try to carry out.”²³

The Congregation is founded in 1839. In 1841, Abbé Combalot leaves us. Consequently, it is up to Marie Eugénie to think through the place of Mary in the life of the Congregation that is being born, as well as the sense of the mystery whose name it carries. From the beginning, it is clear that, while we bear the name “Assumption”, we are not a Congregation with a marian spirituality. Mary has an important place, but the center, as we have seen, has always been Jesus Christ. Surely, the preoccupation of Marie Eugénie for the role of women in the world will move her to discover the role of Mary in the plan of God. Her great spirit of prayer will likewise move her to discover, to savor and to share the riches of the mystery that gives its name to the Congregation. Here are some samples of her thought:

“You are daughters of the Assumption. This mystery, more of heaven than of earth, is a mystery of adoration... In Mary, all is adoration.”²⁴

“Mary is the most perfect of all creatures: she is also the most humble of all creatures. God looked upon the lowliness of his servant, and for this reason he exalted her. Consequently, in ourselves, sincerely and with good faith, a humility that is true and sincere should take root, a humility that is the love of God pushed to the forgetting of oneself.”²⁵

“The Assumption is in a sense a kind of resurrection. It is the beginning of Mary’s life in heaven; and this teaches us that our life should always have a joyful aspect, even in sacrifice.”²⁶

“Certainly, Bishop Gay has admirably defined our spirit when he says that, as Religious Sisters of the Assumption, we should be particularly united, attached to the life of the most holy Virgin, who was nothing other than the life of our Lord Jesus Christ. And, following her example, we should always raise ourselves above earthly things, and move beyond everything with the ‘Sursum corda!’”²⁷

“The Blessed Virgin had an immense desire to see God. This was the reason for her death, for her glorious Assumption.

“The Blessed Virgin desired this infinite good: she wanted his being to fill her completely; and it is because this desire was so strong, that he occupied her entire being, that her body itself was filled with this fullness and that God wanted her to be raised to heaven...

“To be her daughters, we should seek to desire God, to know God, to love Him, to know Jesus Christ, to desire to love him with an ever more patient and more devoted love.”²⁸

“Mary seems to be truly our Mother, as the purely human soul that was so completely clothed with the life of Jesus Christ.”²⁹

This is the development that Marie Eugénie sought, in giving herself over to this desire to be totally “taken up” with God. From her childhood and also already as a religious, Marie Eugénie experienced the loss of people that she greatly loved. This led her to live another

²³ Combalot, Marie-Théodore, « Introduction aux Constitutions des Religieuses de l’Assomption de Notre Dame », in « Textes Fondateurs », pgs. 8 ; 11 ; 15 ; 31.

²⁴ Marie Eugénie de Jésus, Chapter Instruction of 24/02/1878.

²⁵ Marie Eugénie de Jésus, Chapter Instruction of 07/09/1878

²⁶ Marie Eugénie de Jésus, Chapter Instruction of 21/04/1878

²⁷ Marie Eugénie de Jésus, Chapter Instruction of 14 /12/1873

²⁸ Marie Eugénie de Jésus, Chapter Instruction of 19/08/1881

²⁹ Marie Eugénie de Jésus, letter to P. d’Alzon of 27/08/1843, n° 1590.

aspect of the mystery of the Assumption of Mary: the joyful detachment, which she will transmit to her sisters and, through them, to students.

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

This presentation will have no conclusion as such because my sisters will present other aspects of the charism and of the human and spiritual experience of Marie Eugénie.

But I would like to underline one of the thoughts that we have just considered together. It is that we should give thanks for the development undergone by our founders and foundresses. In each of them, we see God at work. And if we have come together here today, it is because they were faithful to what the Lord asked of them.

Blessed be the Lord!

ASSUMPTIONISTS

Fr. Tomás González, A.A.

The human adventure of Fr. d'Alzon

Fr. d'Alzon was born in the 'Midi' of Southern France in a militant Catholic family, belonging to the small nobility (Viscounts), but socially and spiritually very well integrated in what could be termed the project of France as the eldest daughter of the Church.

The personality of any child gets built up in the warmth of family stories. What family stories did the young Emmanuel listen to? Undoubtedly, the old exploits of his ancestors during the wars of religion. Among these, surely, the story of that relative of his, Jean Daudé de Coste, slain in an ambush by 'Camisards'. But not only that: concerning less remote times also, his closest relatives would certainly speak at great length about the horrors of the great Revolution at the end of the previous century. Some of them had narrowly escaped death and had been locked up in the de Coste family's castle-palace, in Vigan itself.

All these accounts must have fired the imagination of the young d'Alzon, stirring all sorts of feelings in his heart, first of all admiration and pride for the deeds of his ancestors, but beyond that an attraction to follow their examples and their tradition of fidelity to Fatherland and Faith, which no doubt intermingled in his mind and heart.

We know that up until age thirteen he lived in the protected and warm atmosphere of the nuclear family, in permanent company with his mother and sisters, and that of his father from further away, physically, but not less attentive and watchful.

The records available to us portray a spontaneous child, full of vitality, extroverted and playful, enjoying all the advantages of his social status and well integrated in his entourage.

The teenager and young man that we find settled in the capital of the Kingdom from 1823 to 1830, the best years of the Restoration, has available to him for developing his personality a privileged environment full of all kinds of stimuli: studies, tutors, friends and acquaintances within the Catholic circles that were then trying to gain hold of the reins of France's destiny, after the damage caused by the great Revolution and the first Empire.

The young d'Alzon seems to have enjoyed almost everything society could offer him: study circles literary guilds, apostolic groups; the finest of everything for a rich, gifted and clever young man.

The world seemed to open itself widely to his ambitions.

The vigilant presence of his parents helped him not to lose his bearings in a setting so rich in opportunities for both good and evil.

By means of a deep sacramental life he preserved his virginity and the innocence of his first communion.

He lived his friendships intensely and passionately, in keeping with his time, when romanticism was blooming. His biographers show him to be selective in his friendships and focused on forming himself for a mission foreseen early in life: the defense of religion.

Among his acquaintances and friends we find the greatest names among the agents of the catholic revival in France in the early 19th century: Lamennais, Lacordaire, Montalembert, De Salinis, Bailly, Guéranger, Combalot...

The break caused by the July Revolution of 1830 brings him back to Lavagnac, in his native 'Midi'. His world becomes narrower, but he is not for that reason paralyzed. He studies, weaves new relationships, reflects and decides on his future: the priesthood as a way of working in the defense of religion, of helping re-christianize society.

Step by step he makes his decisions and puts his ideal into practice. The Seminary in Montpellier, and then in Rome. There he becomes, if not self-taught, certainly quite autonomous in the way he works.

At age 25, neither protracted youth nor premature adulthood, he becomes an autonomous priest and goes back to France. Many possibilities open up for him. He chooses Nîmes, "the worst city of the 'Midi'", in his own words. His uncle, Liron d'Airolles, is a canon of the cathedral there, and it is the diocese in which he was baptized; he embraces a great cause: the conversion of the protestants, which would considerably strengthen the unity of the Church. He lets himself be guided by obedience to his Bishop.

Every diocesan activity receives his encouragement and support: the young, catechetical work, parochial libraries, the 'Dames de la Miséricorde', the Carmelites later on ...

In 1838 he becomes acquainted with Marie-Eugenie, a young foundress seven years his junior. What does this friendship with Marie-Eugenie bring to him?

- Great admiration for the project of re-christianising society.
- An interest in religious life, in the new context of the bourgeois revolution.
- Passion for the renewal of the Church based on the love of Jesus-Christ, and great dedication to the coming of the Kingdom.

The star will soon reappear, ten years after his ordination. 1844: Turin, Paris mark a course that ends in Nîmes, in the unexpected setting of a boarding school and of a group of exceptional people God had been slowly gathering together: Germinate-Durand, Monnier, Brown, Pernet, Cardenne... The Assumption Association is born, an aspiration fleshed out in a project: The Assumption.

It is an attitude above all: to love Jesus-Christ and everything he loves, in the service of the Church then dealing with a world that, with the Industrial revolution, evolves at great speed. Taking up the challenge requires a painful effort. Emmanuel d'Alzon does so with such enthusiasm that he will soon exhaust his physical energies.

On May 19, 1854 a bad case of meningitis fells him. Physical recovery will be slow, but the spiritual renovation will bear fruit. Confined by the disease, which limits his activity, his interior evolution will deepen into a kind of love less active and more "crucified" for the Lord. There appears a second motto: "For the love of Our Lord Jesus-Christ". Love is shown through works, but its intensity does not depend on the quantity of the work.

The development of the Assumptionist Congregation will be slow.

However, in 1863 it has already reached Australia and the Near East. In 1865 Fr. D'Alzon founds the Oblates of the Assumption, for the mission in Bulgaria.

In 1869 he takes an active part in the First Vatican Council which was interrupted by the Franco-Prussian war and its bitter consequences.

In spite of everything, the last ten years of Fr. d'Alzon's life, were fruitful in lasting initiatives: alumnats, pilgrimages, social initiatives, catholic press...

Finally, the ordeal, the persecution.

The expulsion decree was issued a few days before his death. Father d'Alzon had defended the Jesuits; now he shares their fate.

He left this world comforted by knowing that, having formed "many good religious", these would carry on his quest against wind and tide in the spirit that he bequeathed to them: "Love of Jesus-Christ, of Mary his Mother, and of the Church his Spouse".

OBLATES DE L'ASSOMPTION

Preliminary remarks

The Oblates of the Assumption have as their founder, Father Emmanuel d'Alzon, and as co-founder, Mère Emmanuel-Marie Correnson. On the occasion of the colloquium on the origins of the Assumption family, Sister Hugues-Emmanuel identified other brothers and sisters who were likewise played a role in our foundation. For this work, we will insist exclusively on the person of Fr. d'Alzon. In fact, even if certain traits of the charism were influenced by Mère Emmanuel-Marie or other brothers and sisters, the essence of the charism, it seems to us, comes from Fr. d'Alzon

We would also like to recall, if only briefly some aspects of the foundation of our Congregation. These will enable us to identify some of the human and spiritual experiences of the founder that underlie our charism.

In 1862, upon receiving a word from Pope Pius IX, Father d'Alzon heard a call to go to the Near East in view of working for the return of dissident Christians. At the outset he sends Fr. Galabert to Constantinople. Quickly enough, the Assumptionists ask for a feminine presence to work with them. Father d'Alzon then turns to Mère Marie-Eugénie de Jésus Milleret for the foundation of a feminine community. The first project, of February 1864, is to establish a house of adoration, as well as a training school for teachers.

The project evolves for the Religious Sisters of the Assumption are unable to respond to Father d'Alzon call. With Mère Marie-Eugénie, Father d'Alzon thinks of founding a third category resembling the Dominican tertiaries, but for the Assumption. These would belong to a category situated between the "choir Sisters" and the "lay sisters". They would live in community. Father d'Alzon wanted to take them "for the colleges in France and for the popular schools in Bulgaria and in the Near East."³⁰ The following day, Father d'Alzon writes to Father Galabert to confirm the fact that he initiated the foundation of a teacher training school to prepare instructors for Bulgaria. These would be accustomed to a harsher kind of life, in order to prepare them to live in an "uncivilized milieu".³¹ Finally, differences between Marie-Eugénie and Fr. d'Alzon led him to form a distinct Congregation, avec young women from the Cévennes area. But the project of Fr. d'Alzon remained the same: "to form a house of adoration of the Blessed Sacrament for good women from the mountain who would live from their work, their sacrifice and their prayer; the most fervent of these would be sent to Bulgaria as school teachers." Father Galabert reminds Father d'Alzon that he also needs hospital sisters. In 1865, the Congregation of the Oblates of the Assumption is founded. In 1868, after spending some time at the college of the Assumption in Nîmes, the first Oblates leave for Bulgaria. Two will work at the school, two others will care for the sick, one will remain at home to work in the kitchen.

Human and spiritual experiences of Fr. d'Alzon

Father d'Alzon and the dissident Churches

The Cévenol area in southern France, where Father d'Alzon was born, was permanently marked by the confessional split between Protestants and Catholics. His own family became famous in the struggle in favor of the Catholic Church. Already during his childhood,

³⁰ Letter 2371 – Fr. d'Alzon to M. Eugénie, 1 November 1864

³¹ Letter 2373 –Fr. d'Alzon to Fr. Galabert, 2 November 1864

Emmanuel heard others speak of his ancestors, models of courage and bravery, who died at the hands of the Protestants: some, having lost all of their possessions in the service of the Church, others, having hidden faithful priests during the Terror... Thus was quite naturally born in him a sincere attachment to the Church, to the Pope and a desire for a unified Church.

As a young priest, Father d'Alzon returned to service the diocese of Nîmes, soon to be named Vicar General. In carrying out this mission, Father d'Alzon travelled the region in order to carry out his pastoral visits. It seems that Father d'Alzon, following the example of Msgr. Sibour, was given to the work of preaching, to youth ministry and to the conversion of Protestants. His orientation was in the direction of proselytizing. His goal was to attempt to bring Protestants back to the Catholic fold. His preoccupation in this sense is expressed in a particularly clear way in the creation of a Third Order of women, some of whom would be at the origin of the Association of Saint Francis de Sales, created by Fr. d'Alzon for the rapprochement of Catholics and Protestants.

The passion of Father d'Alzon for the Near East went far beyond the fact of a confessional divide, for from his youth he had a great interest in the Fathers of the Church: he read the Greek Fathers like Denys the Areopagyte, Clement of Alexandria, Saint Athanasius, Saint Basil the Great, Saint Gregory of Nazianzen, Saint Ephrem of Assemani and Saint John Chrysostom. However, when it came to deciding on apostolic works in the Near East, Father d'Alzon's thinking regarding the dissident Eastern Church was hardly different from his thinking regarding the Protestants. In the spirit of Father d'Alzon, the schismatics are the ones who need to be converted and brought back to the cradle of Peter. The destruction of the Eastern schism is one of the goals to be pursued. Pope Pius IX was very much interested in the separated Churches and strongly urged them to be reunited with the Catholics. In 1860, the Bulgarian Church wanted to draw closer to Rome. After the defection of Sokolski, which could have halted the uniate movement, the Pope had to find other workers to continue this effort of rapprochement. After a private audience with the Pope in 1862, Father d'Alzon wrote: "I came away with the right, almost the mission, to study the very serious question of the return to the faith of these eastern populations and to find, with the help of prominent personages, the means to be taken to achieve the goal." This is the reason for which, after having sent Father Galabert on his mission, Father d'Alzon undertook himself a voyage to Constantinople in 1863, a journey that had a truly apostolic character. Once in the Ottoman capital, he wrote to Mère Marie-Eugénie: "Could you imagine founding a boarding school at Philippopoli? One day it will be the most important city after Constantinople, where the Ladies of Sion have located themselves. Could you establish here a teachers training school for women? (...) You could enter by means of adoration; you would find more vocations for contemplation than for action (...) What is needed most of all in Constantinople is to show our Lord as honored. The schismatic Bishops fortunately celebrate Mass only once a month ; priests, every eight days. The profanation of the sacred species is horrible, by negligence, by lack of cleanliness and by the ignorance of the clergy. (...) The good to be done here should be done by the schools among the people, by taking young Bulgarians or Greeks and by forming them to learning and to apostolic zeal."³² Once back in France, he speaks to Marie-Eugénie about a foundation in Varna and another in Andrinopolis. But neither of these foundations sees the light of day with the Religious Sisters of the Assumption. It is then that he will found a new religious Congregation, the Oblates of the Assumption, destined specifically to support the Eastern missionaries in their apostolate.

³² Letter 1915 – Fr. d'Alzon to M. Eugénie, 24 February 1863

Father d'Alzon and teaching

We have seen that Father d'Alzon gave a great deal of importance to establishing schools in the Near East. This concern for educating youth and children is not new. It is part and parcel of Father d'Alzon's entire life. In fact, as soon as he arrived in Nîmes after his priestly ordination, he held onto the idea of founding a school. In 1836, two young professors from the University, Jules Monnier and Germer-Durant, discover in d'Alzon's message a genuine Christian inspiration and are ready to ally themselves with his apostolic zeal in the work of Christian teaching. In 1838, Abbé Combalot puts him in touch with Marie-Eugénie Milleret, foundress of the Religious Sisters of the Assumption, whose goal is to serve the Church by the Christian formation of young women. Also in 1838, Abbé Vermot founds the boarding school of the Assumption in Nîmes to provide the diocese with an academic institution, free from university interference. The school was in decline; it became Father d'Alzon's property in 1943, in his absence and without his knowing. Despite all of the difficulties and opposition, Father d'Alzon brought the college back to life. In the teaching of the time, the reigning ideology tended to deny the supernatural or certain truths of dogma. Father d'Alzon, for his part, wanted to restore all things in Christ and considered that this task should begin with the young. By means of education, Father d'Alzon dreamt of making young people fully Christian, by means of a continuing work on their young souls. "The formation of Jesus Christ in souls, that is the unique goal of education, and since Jesus Christ came to be the perfect man, *in virum perfectum*, when we have set young people on the road to achieving the perfections of the Man-God, we will have given them the best preparation for live. (...)"³³

Father d'Alzon, founder

By the time he founded the Oblates, Father d'Alzon had already spent twenty years guiding his own Congregation. While in Paris, in 1845, he made private vows of religion at Notre Dame des Victoires, and he shared his project with others. This plan to found a new religious family was already well established. The first constitutions were written and given to the religious in 1855. Also, in 1857, the decree of approbation is granted by Pope Pius IX, making of the Congregation an institute recognized in the Church. The Congregation of the Augustinians of the Assumption had already reached a certain maturity. The first disciples founded their apostolic zeal less on works than on the love of Christ. Nonetheless, they will always be at the service of the Church's apostolic priorities and especially of the calls addressed to them by the Pope. In 1860 their service to the Church takes them far afield, with their departure to Australia. Their presence in the Near East was in response to a request made by Pope Pius IX to help the uni-ate Church of Bulgaria in its consolidation and development. And it is for this reason that, despite small numbers, he sent Father Galabert to the Near East and will himself travel to Constantinople. This eastern reality required a feminine presence, which gave rise to a feminine foundation.

We know that Fr. d'Alzon maintained a special contact with Marie-Eugénie. A similarity in the vision of the two founders is evident in their zeal for the extension of the reign of Jesus Christ in souls. But Father d'Alzon also accompanied various religious Congregations in the diocese of Nîmes. It was natural that Father d'Alzon would dream of a new solution like a Third Order, or something like the Dominican tertiaries when the Religious Sisters of the Assumption decline his invitation for a new foundation. Thanks to his experience with different forms of consecrated life, Father d'Alzon could imagine other forms of religious life, neither choir sisters, nor lay sisters, while still preserving the special character that he wanted for the Oblates.

³³ l'Assomption, p. 189 -

Father d'Alzon's impatient character is known to everyone, and the urgency of the Kingdom (and Fr. Galabert) impelled him. So, then, Father d'Alzon preferred to create something new rather than wait for the Religious Sisters of the Assumption to be ready. The Oblates will receive, with a few modifications, the same constitutions as those of the Assumptionist Fathers, as well as the same Directory. A large part of their charism is rooted in that of the Fathers and in the long experience that Father d'Alzon already had with the foundation of his own Congregation.

Father d'Alzon and Vatican Council I

Vatican Council I, at which Father d'Alzon accompanied his Bishop, has a profound influence on his vision of the Church. It is there that he experiences very concretely its universality. "Do you know which aspect of Rome today moves me the most? It is meeting Bishops of all countries."³⁴ "You can't imagine what I am seeing here. The biggest space is certainly not occupied by the Hungarian Bishops, who are the last great Lords of Europe; it belongs to the missionary Bishops, who make their way to the Council by foot because they do not have a vehicle. It likewise does not belong to the learned men who will help to draft the decrees and canons. One senses that these are working for others, and that those for whom the Council is being held are the friends of God, the humble and the poor. Believe me, the power of the future is there. It is by poverty and lowliness that the world will be saved, if it can be."³⁵

This experience is a turning point with regard to the mission fields that he will envision for the Oblates. "North America, South America, Asia, Chaldea, Syria, Egypt, Central Africa, they are all providing their share, and all of this is working for the Catholic Church, and in these countries there are enormous gains to be made, and it is almost everywhere in mission countries where the Oblates can work."³⁴ The mission is no longer the Near East alone. The only boundary Fr. d'Alzon sets for the Oblates is "the great wall of China."³⁶

These meetings will also sensitize Fr. d'Alzon to the small and the poor, towards whom he sends the Oblates. Wanting first of all to renew society by means of the Christian formation of the elite, he had already begun to turn his attention to other populations with the foundation of the Oblates (the first sisters came from the countryside in the Cévennes region). The experience of the Council will open him still more in this sense. "I ate...with some missionary Bishops. I cannot tell you how much these men seem to be above everything because they are poor, because they are devoted and because, having nothing to give, they give themselves. Believe me, dear child, go especially in the direction of giving yourself completely."³⁵

This openness will move within a few years toward the opening of the alumnats.

Father d'Alzon and the passion for holiness, for perfection

Father d'Alzon will never have stopped seeking Christian perfection, holiness for himself and for those that he accompanies. And for him, this is to be found in a great love of Christ. Father d'Alzon had a good deal of experience as a spiritual director of people and of Congregations. He networked and oriented the people he directed in terms of the Church's needs and what he perceived in them.

³⁴ Letter 3767 – Fr. d'Alzon to M. Emmanuel-Marie, 17 November 1869

³⁵ Letter 3784 – Fr. d'Alzon to M. Emmanuel-Marie, 14 December 1869

³⁶ Letter 3794 – Fr. d'Alzon to Oblate novices, 22 December 1869

To Marie Correnson, he wrote along these lines: “You should seek perfection. There are different degrees. I urge you to seek the perfection that God is expecting of you. Understand me well: no other perfection, but all of the perfection God is asking.” For Father d’Alzon, the search for holiness is at the heart of every vocation and apostolic action. The two form a whole. The first article of the Constitutions take up the theme: “The aim of our small association is to work for our perfection by extending the reign of Jesus Christ in souls.” During the Council, he wrote once again: “In seeing so many missionary Bishops, I ask myself why the world is not converted. Alas, because it needs more saints than we have.” And Fatehr Galabert wrote after Fr. d’Alzon’s death: “My conviction is that one of our first obligations is to work for the canonization of the one who, after having guided us on this earth along the ways of Christian perfection, by giving us an example of every virtue, has become our heavenly guide and protector.”

LITTLE SISTERS OF THE ASSUMPTION

Foreword

“Deepen our knowledge of our Charism”. We have been requested to do this and it is a request to which we want to respond.

We are not professional researchers. We will work from the human-spiritual experience of Etienne Pernet and Antoinette Fage on the one hand and that of ourselves as Little Sisters of the Assumption on the other.

We want to understand how the human-spiritual experience of our founders has imprinted the charism as we have received it ... and how we live the charism in the context of our human and spiritual experience to-day.

We also wish to understand how the charism of the Little Sisters of the Assumption integrates with the charism of the Assumption, yesterday and to-day.

THE HUMAN-SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE IS AN INDIVISIBLE EXPERIENCE

We carry within ourselves the mystery of life. This is the deepest reality of our being. We receive Life, we take care of it and we diffuse it. The daily occurrences are a call to live Life as a vocation to exist: “Choose life” (Dt 10,19) Every human experience is an experience of the Spirit. Spirituality is a way of being in life according to how we welcome and respond to it. It is also through spirituality that we access our nourishment at the source of life. All human experience is inherently human and spiritual. It enables us to live the divine aspect of our being in our humanity.

It was in the context of the circumstances of daily life that Etienne Pernet and Antoinette Fage responded to life. “It was in them initially that the evangelical characteristics were formed which would eventually become the features of our spirituality” (Sr Giselle Marchand psa – A L’origine de la spiritualité des Petites Soeurs de l’Assomption - Points de Repères - Decembre 1991)

Antoinette Fage was very aware of the bond between her life and her vocation as Foundress of the Congregation. She remarked to a sister: “God knows what we need and we, we know nothing ... When God called me to His service I was no longer young and I had had so many problems to deal with prior to this. While I was going through all that, I had no idea what God had in mind for me ... now, I bless Him for everything” (Testimony No 9)

ETIENNE PERNET AND ANTOINETTE FAGE

Two people, born the same year 1824: Etienne on 23rd July in Franche-Comte. Antoinette born on 7th November in Paris.

WHAT WAS THEIR JOURNEY?

Étienne grew up in a small village, Velleux, in a simple Christian family. His father was a farm worker who also worked in the iron works. His mother, Magdaleine Cordelet, was the well-loved village midwife

An incident throws light on his childhood: one day at catechism, the priest put the question: "Perhaps some day, one of you will be a priest?". "That will be me" "said Etienne to himself. His father died when he was 14 years old. He was the eldest of 5 children and the family faced destitution. He could have helped by going out to work. However, his mother encouraged him to continue to study with a view to becoming a priest. At age 20, as his theological formation was taking shape, Etienne left the seminary, uncertain of his vocation. He felt he could not take on the responsibilities of the priesthood. He would confide later: "The weight of souls frightened me".

He went home to his mother. For a while he worked as a tutor but very soon, he could find no more work in Franche-Comte. Like many other people from the provinces, he went to Paris seeking employment. He took several small jobs to subsist. He fell ill physically and emotionally. This time he could not go home to his mother: he hadn't his train-fare. In the middle of his distress he wrote: "What do I do in this kind of situation? Throw myself into the arms of the Lord and ask Him for help and protection". For 14 long years he kept asking the Lord: "My God, what do you want me to do?" He experienced extreme material poverty with great inner disarray while abandoning himself totally into the hands of the Lord.

The answer came to him through intermediaries. He met a priest who sensed he had a vocation to the priesthood in a religious institute. He sent Etienne to Mère Marie Eugénie de Jésus, foundress of the Religious of the Assumption at Nîmes. The latter put him in touch with Père Emmanuel D'Alzon who had founded the Augustinians of the Assumption at Nîmes. In the beginning, they were dedicated exclusively to education. Soon, Etienne entered the novitiate and made profession at Christmas 1850. He taught in a college for several years. He wished above all things to be totally committed to God's will but he was not at ease with teaching and this was a source of suffering for him. "*Ill at ease with himself, he did not fit in well with his confreres*". He felt this as a failure. At the same time, despite all their efforts, his family slipped deeper and deeper into poverty.

At this time, the Fathers of the Assumption started a school for needy children from workers' families at Nîmes. Etienne was asked to manage it. He was very shocked by their misery. Some years later he said: "*I do not know why these poor people confided to me their pain and their misery. The women in Enclos Rey especially, trusted me so much. It was there that I saw distress which I could hardly name*". Like an arrow, an intuition shot through him. Something had to be done but what, how, with whom? Etienne knew how to wait, how to allow for maturation. He continued to pray at Nîmes and then at Paris where a pastoral of listening was offered to him. In 1864, he met Antoinette Fage. It was through this unexpected meeting that his intuition became clearer and it was to become his project for life.

Antoinette she came from a Parisian family with a precarious background and having very little religious input. She was the only child of a father who was in the army. Usually absent, she scarcely knew him. Her mother earned her living as a badly paid seamstress.

When Antoinette was six, her grandmother, whom she loved, was killed by a stray bullet during the revolution of 1830. At 12 years, following a fall which was not treated properly, she became deformed with severe scoliosis, leaving her in constant pain for the rest

of her life. At age 13, her mother died and she was alone in an enormous emotional void. *“I felt such a shock from this tragedy that my health was affected. I had only my mother in the whole world. I was an orphan. This word hurt me so much that I cried just to hear it uttered.”*

A family friend received Antoinette into her home. Later, she decided to live alone and to earn her living as a seamstress. Here, concern for her companions at work, their situation and their future, especially that of the trainees, became part of her life. She was friendly and supportive with them up to the point of sharing. In 1861, at age 37, she was offered a position as manager of an orphanage. She was very pleased because she loved young people. Despite her frail exterior, she was light-hearted and fun loving. Young people loved her. She left the orphanage in 1865 because of friction between herself and the founders of that work. In 1864 she had met Etienne Pernet: that meeting was to be life-changing for her.

A DECISIVE ENCOUNTER

In Paris, Etienne was haunted by the distress in workers' families. He mulled incessantly over what could be the solution to what he termed the “woes of the worker” This included moral and spiritual problems, because, coming from a provincial setting and plunged into the anonymity of a large city, families lost the comfort of family ties and shared Christian values. It was a case of dealing first the immediate needs of day-to-day living, the needs of mothers and their children: *“There were things to do and say that no man or priest could either do or say. A woman was needed, a woman who would be a religious”*. Pragmatist that he was, he knew that only women would be able to carry out this work, women religious called to care for the sick in their own home, but also and above all, to *“regenerate a people for God”*.

It was early in May 1864. Etienne went to see Antoinette in the Orphanage. He was looking for help for an acquaintance. This encounter prepared the foundation of the Congregation of the Little Sisters of the Assumption.

Etienne sensed immediately the ability of this person, Antoinette. God had placed on his path the co-worker he needed. In May 1865, he suggested that she would help him bring about the undertaking he had glimpsed in Nimes in the poor quarter of the Enclos Rey, which would be to help meet the needs of the worker's family. Antoinette resisted at first. She wrote: *“... as he spoke and explained his plan to me, I was in agony. Father, neither the sick nor nurses interest me ... what you are asking of me is impossible: I cannot and I do not want to be a religious.”* Then she threw herself into the undertaking with all her energy, bringing to bear on it her qualities of heart, intelligence and organisation, giving substance to the intuition of Etienne Pernet. From these two people, passionate about God and the salvation of the poor, was born a very specific Congregation

THE ORIGINALITY OF THE RESPONSE

A small number of young women accepted to live out this project of going into the worker's family when there was illness and to multitask: care of the sick, the children and the household. This was offered free of charge in view of the poverty of the families and the absence of social services.

Workers were deemed to be little more than appendages of machines. They were a section of the community who were badly housed, badly nourished, decimated by tuberculosis and epidemics of cholera. This poverty had several labels: economic, social, cultural,

psychological and identity. It was a poverty which undermined human relationships and caused the family to disintegrate. For Etienne and Antoinette, it was not a question of merely helping out a few families. They realised that society as a whole was being damaged. Their objective in the immediate was to meet the human need, but it was also and above all, apostolic: *“Bring about the glory of God through the salvation of the poor and the little ones.”* (E.Pernet Instructions, Vol. V11, p 193: 23.06.1892) They wished to respond to the call to be just towards the poor, the beloved of God.

It was at this time that the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891 – Pope Leo XIII) was taking shape where the Church denounced the inhuman conditions of work. Liberal and social Catholicism was coming into being. Trade unionism and the workers’ movement were beginning as were socialism, marxism and the explosion of anti-clericalism. Various works and institutions sprang up to deal with the need to protect the faith of workers and to remake society.

Etienne and Antoinette were aware of the trends of their time. They were conscious of:

- *The special place* of the family in society and in God’s plan.
- *The (impact of) encounters* (groupings) with persons, families and fraternities.

What was innovative was that they offered an evangelical response from within the daily reality of the life of the worker’s family.

WHAT LIES AT THE ROOT OF THE VOCATION OF THE LITTLE SISTERS OF THE ASSUMPTION IS THE CALL

- **To witness** to the love of God amongst the poor, the workers and their families through the quality of their attentive presence in the ordinary gestures of service, the same path of incarnation as lived by Jesus, Servant.
- **To regenerate** the fabric of relationships in the family.
- **To remake a people for God.** The Fraternity groupings are a link in the network which binds people together amongst themselves in order to better experience friendship, trust, solidarity, justice, peace and to surmount the manifold inequalities and oppression.

ETIENNE PERNET AND ANTOINETTE FAGE: two lives on a path of poverty

Etienne Pernet Over a period of 14 years, Etienne Pernet carried painfully within himself this long and difficult search: *“I suffered severely for 14 years searching to find exactly what God wanted of me”*.

When Etienne entered the Assumption congregation, what he desired above all else was: “ ... to become capable of walking in harmony with God’s will, to the exclusion of all self-seeking” (4-7-1850). Through his friendship and his spiritual direction, Father d’Alzon supported Etienne in his growth towards total availability to what God wanted. Etienne reflected, assimilated, interiorised. He schooled himself using the daily events as the material from which he fashioned his responses. (Sr Giselle Marchand “A l’origine de la Spiritualité des

Petites Soeurs de l'Assomption" p. 16-19). Pere d'Alzon suggested that he be turned towards Christ:

- **in a gentle trusting obedience:**

"Turn to Our Lord everyday and become a man of prayer. Do not get discouraged. There is something in the sincerity of your desire to go to Our Lord which will touch the heart of God. Do your best and don't worry about anything else".(26-1-1854).

- **In the gift of himself** in the service of God, Christ, the Church, because love demands action.

"With all the ardour of which we are capable, patiently, in our weakness and poverty, our humility and love". (4-10-1853).

" Show zeal, charity, gentleness patience and above all, a great spirit of faith. Let us seek only God and we will find him." (4-10-1859)

- **Accepting what he is**

"Be good to everybody, including oneself. Do not envy others. God gives each his individual vocation. You should be grateful for your own, not only as a religious, but also for who you are." (7-7-1850)

"You must accept your momentary uselessness in view of your resurrection some day." (4-3-1863)

Antoinette Fage. She did not receive a religious education, but she went to the churches to hear the Word of God. God *"spoke to her heart"*. About the age of 18 years, she discovered the strength of a lively faith. In 1853, she joined the Association de Notre Dame du Bon Conseil. From this time onwards, Antoinette had great devotion to the Blessed Virgin. She often said later: *"It is to Our Lady of Good Council that I owe my vocation."* In 1861, aged 37 years, she became a member of the third order of St Dominic.

She had become accustomed to leading her own life. She was very independent - and at the same time, she grieved that there was no affection in her life: *"Yes, I have always suffered and I will always be unhappy to feel that nowhere on this earth is there anybody who would love me specially and on whom I could rely. I have always been unhappy about this. I have tried in vain to suppress this need of my heart, trying to bury it deep within me. I feel it so much at times that the pain could betray me." (1865)* Antoinette understood very early that her need for affection while trying to establish stability in her life as well as searching for God's will in her regard was not something she could accomplish alone. She sought help from various priests. When she met Etienne Pernet, he became her spiritual guide. *"I need to be guided, checked and corrected. I abandon myself to you Father, if that is God's will... All I offer in its totality, is my will". (1864)* Later, she remarked: *"I am happy, yes, very happy now to place at your disposal this great need which God has kindled in me, to have compassion for all suffering, all the ills and to do my best to ease them with all the means available to me". (1865)*

Antoinette's suffering transformed itself into an ardent impulse which opened her to others. *"In the strength of her love and her dedication, she was drawn principally towards the little ones, the weaker ones, the abandoned. The more miserable they were, the more they had access to her tenderness and her service."* (E Pernet)

**THE HUMAN AND SPIRITUAL HERITAGE WHICH ETIENNE AND ANTOINETTE
TRANSMITTED TO US.**

- *Nourish desire: a path in life*

Etienne and Antoinette were “beings of desire” (cf “a l’Ecoute d’un Desire” and “L’Aurore d’un jour nouveau” Marie Noelle de la Bassetiere. psa)

How would one pin-point this process in Etienne?

He wanted to be a priest, to give his life to God. Unsure of himself, he left the seminary after several years of preparation. We find him in Paris, sick, having lost all his moorings: vocation, home, family. He experienced being plunged into psychological and spiritual distress. During this period which lasted several years, the crucial element for him was the tenacity with which he prayed. He asked God constantly to show him His will. “*Lord what do you want me to do*” He found a place for this time of prayer, the basilica of Notre Dame des Victoires, and he asked the Blessed Virgin to intercede for him.

He wanted a conversion to a new way of life – which became a new form of action. For him, to find the ‘how’ and the ‘where’ of *this action* was going to take a long time. Even after the intuition of the Enclos Rey, the way was still unclear. He was consumed by a project, but with no idea how to realise it. He waited ...and waited for signs. He would write later: “*What God wants is our heart and our will. We hold them from him, but He has left us free to use them ... he will not force us.*” (17-06-1888)

He lived out in his flesh a process of obedience. His humility released his creativity. There is a link between desire and humility. Humility (humus = earth) is like the earth which receives the life force of desire and its development.

How do we perceive this process in Antoinette?

Antoinette had a strong personality which enabled her to overcome the innumerable obstacles strewn on her path. Physical, psychological and spiritual suffering never broke her resilient temperament. Under a frail exterior, she knew exactly what she wanted. When Father Pernet asked her to help him to initiate the little venture of caring for the sick, she was not open to something which would interfere with how she wanted to live. She refused categorically to take on this project. “*That is impossible ... the sick and their carers are of no interest to me... I cannot and I do not want to be a religious ... I have not got what it takes to start a work of this kind ... I will look after the young girls. I want to be free ...*”

Antoinette declared emphatically what she wanted. She would not countenance any interference in her life-style. For Antoinette, in the middle of this upheaval, an experience of Pentecost was needed. What does the Lord say to persons to whom he entrusts a mission and who refuse? “*I will be with you*” (Ex 3,12: Jer 1,8) And Father Pernet answered Antoinette: “*I will help you. I will even carry you. Our Lord gives me the assurance that we will get along together because, together with Him, we seek only one thing: to do the will of God, procure His glory by saving souls*”. The key which succeeded in opening Antoinette to her future was her ability to receive the movement of life. She lost what she most valued, but she opened up to a *purified desire*.

TODAY

Every human being wants what he lacks. It is a kind of void which, when experienced pushes us on to something else, to the next step. This happens through crises which are often painful. At every stage in our life, moments of insecurity arise continually coupled with the desire to go further. We live this experience in our personal journeys and in the unfolding of our religious family, an international apostolic body. Through their journey, our Founders

inspire us to be women of desire, ready to welcome the movement of life, prepared to be the humble, fertile earth which keeps the charism alive, nourishes it and diffuses it. They enable us to go through crises with the resilience born of prayer.

- ***Experience the love of God which saves in poverty and weakness.***

The second article of the RL reads: *“Etienne Pernet and Antoinette Fage heard and welcomed the call of God. They experienced the love of God which saves in weakness and poverty.”*

Material poverty and well beyond this, human poverty and weakness. In the middle of this poverty and weakness, they allowed themselves to be loved, healed and saved. They made this frailty the space where the tenderness of God could come near. In this same movement, they learned to welcome their fragility and that of others as the space where God reveals the face of Jesus, Servant and Saviour

“You and I are only very weak reeds. In spite of that, we can be strong, very strong: we can say with St Paul: I can do all things in Him who strengthens me ... From the moment where you are just an agent, an instrument of God, you will no longer vacillate: you will not recognise yourself. Go forward therefore full of confidence and abandonment.” (Letter from Etienne Pernet to Antoinette Fage 05-11-1864). *“When I am weak, then I am strong.”* (2Cor 12,10)

“Jesus show me the poor and I will run to them with a truly fraternal heart. Lord, you will help my good will. You will make up for my inexperience. You will teach me to be respectful, delicate discreet with all ills. You will be the support of my hope and the reward of my efforts”. (Personal Notes p 9)

The experience of the love of God who saves in poverty and weakness made Etienne and Antoinette sensitive to a Word of God addressed to them but not only to them. This experience became a prophetic response: the love of God reconciles and restores the fabric of human relationships wherever they are threatened, especially in the heart of the family.

TODAY

“To experience the love of God which saves in weakness and poverty” remains a fundamental necessity in the epoch in which we live. As Little Sisters of the Assumption, we are invited to make the areas of our fragility and our daily living, a space where God can reveal His tenderness and His healing. *“How can you help the poor if you are not poor yourselves”.* (Etienne Pernet to Little Sisters of the Assumption - March 1879). To discover our response to the love of God, must we not be poor ourselves and become alert to his prophetic word in the ordinary of every day? Following the footsteps of our Founders, we allow ourselves to be challenged and to become pro-active in view of the changes in society. The certitude that God saves in weakness and poverty is for us, a prophetic word which inspires us to give fresh answers to each new epoch.

- ***Live the sacred in the ordinary.***

The inner journey of Etienne and Antoinette was transformed in its depths through their listening to their hearts, to life and to their environment. They had refined two biblical attitudes: listening and looking. They experienced the details of their lives in a specific way, like spaces indwelt by the sacred. In this sense, they followed the path of Jesus' Incarnation. Because of this experience, they received gratuitously, energies, a call and they recognised. They responded in such a way that the human and the divine were bonded in an incredibly strong union.

“Whether you are nursing the sick, grouping parents of families, you are doing the work of the moment. Be worthy of your mission and may the transformations that you are effecting spread out over the whole world... You are nothing and yet you must work on this immense undertaking. I want you to do it quietly, humbly, unnoticed”. (Etienne Pernet 21-1-1894).

“You can achieve wonderful projects, design all sorts of good works but if you have not got charity in your hearts, your wonderful projects will come to naught and nothing will remain of them. Each of you must become a motor, a powerful instrument of salvation for the harvest of souls. If you give yourselves energetically to what God asks of you, a world will rise up around you to do God’s work”. (E.Pernet 02-08-1881)

“The Little Sister should have within her, an infinite tenderness for her patient because she is seeking the glory of Good as well as performing a work of mercy. Few words: a lot of action. Sermons are tiring. The sensitivity and delicacy of understated love attracts and wins hearts”. (E.Pernet 1876)

Etienne was familiar with the ordinary daily round. Life is a space, a time woven of the joys and sorrows common to all humanity but where God can reveal himself. We find in it echoes of the existential experience of Moses: *“Take off your sandals, for the ground on which you walk is holy ground”.* (Ex3,5). Everything is important and everything is sacred. Everything is charged with the deep meaning in events, as Jesus’ prayer suggests. *“I bless you that you have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and revealed them to little ones”* (Lk 10, 21). This affinity with ordinary living is a path aligned with the human-divine aspect of life. It transforms the gaze and the heart. It is communion with Jesus who saves: it unites us in compassion with the cry of the poor and it invites us to contemplate the Kingdom which is here and which is coming.

TO-DAY

In another context, we continue to share the joys and sorrows of the poor. We attach great importance to the practical details of everyday reality. The R.L. #18 says: *“Following Jesus who came to live among us, who lived poor, who worked with his hands and who proclaimed the good news through the simplest realities: bread, water, light, healing, life and death: it is in the details of ordinary life that we want to show the love of the Father”.*

We are aware that we are weaving history as we walk through each day with others. This leads us to forming criteria for discernment for choosing life both in our own unfolding history and that of humanity. In so far as we can, we try to elicit questioning and effect transformations in the societies where we live. The daily round becomes the laboratory where, with others, we search for new ways to live together and therefore, new ways of proclaiming the Good News. The promise of the Kingdom of peace inaugurated by Jesus, takes place in this continual re-interpretation of reality, in the context of what is lived out on a daily basis.

- **Live with Jesus as with someone we love**

“Live with Him as with someone we love.” (Etienne Pernet Conferences 13-12-1888). Etienne Pernet proposes that we live with Jesus as with someone who loves us and lives with us. That was his own experience throughout his spiritual journey. He came to know by experience that the life of a disciple of Jesus is a life nourished by his love and that Christ strengthens human frailty.

“Every morning he awakens my ear so that I listen as a disciple” (Is 50, 4). This word became flesh in Jesus. It is also a word spoken in the weakness of our flesh.

It was this same word which created the world. It is a word which acts and from which action arises. It is not just a promise: it is an affirmation. The world can change and it will, even if it is only in the secret places of our action, in the unrecognised suffering of the poor, there, where it will not be seen. God affirms: *“The word which comes forth from my mouth does not return empty”*. (Is 55,11). To welcome the word, to spend time meditating on it, this transforms our heart, our gaze, our action and we begin to see what we were unable to see.

“I never cease asking you to look at Our Lord, to identify with your model because we take on so easily the traits of those with whom we live.” (Etienne Pernet 7,6, 1888X, 524)

“What I think about most and what I would wish from you is that you would speak for Jesus Christ and that your action would speak Jesus Christ”. (Etienne Pernet 21-10-1876, 102)

- ***Be among the people with an attitude of tenderness and welcome.***

For Etienne Pernet and Antoinette Fage, Jesus fulfilled the mission his Father entrusted to him as someone who loves in the midst of the realities of daily life, with actions and words which heal, welcome, console, renew the hope of the poor, the sick, the marginalised, men, women and children. *“I came that all would have life and have it in abundance.”*(Jn 10, 10) He used to say to the first Little Sisters: *“The portion which is properly that of the Little Sister, is the poor, the worker and his family: this portion she will love with a preferential love”* (Etienne Pernet, Directory, Part 1, Chap 10.). She said: *“When the veil of charity touches the face of the poor, the face of Jesus is engraved there for eternity”*. (Antoinette Fage)

TO-DAY

To-day, we are careful to conserve, to keep alive and to deepen what lies at the heart of the charism: the life of the disciple of Jesus, Servant. It is a life of action, a life made of gestures and words. *“In him, life and mission are one”* (RL 29). Following Jesus, we learn that our project in life must be similar to that which He chose. This moulds how we situate ourselves. To-day, in societies that do not know Jesus, and where human history is far from fashioning human history in line with the Kingdom, in order to be prophetic and understandable, our action must be accompanied with a word which reveals the Person of Jesus.

- ***Re-make a people for God ... “to gather the dispersed children of God.”*** (Jn 11, 52)

These words of Etienne Pernet still speak to us to-day. *“You will go to the humble ... you will go everywhere because everywhere there are the sick, the poor... The Little Sister is missionary ... all the more so as she must live among the poor”*. (E...Pernet Com. Constitutions 24-04-1890 and 07-06-1894). *“I saw the misery of my people ... I have heard their cry ... go, I send you”* (Ex 3, 7-10).

The notion of people is central in the Bible. The people of God are called to inaugurate new human relationships so that the visage of the community becomes the visage of God. In the community of the people of God the barriers which turn people into enemies of each other, disappear. For Etienne, the deepest meaning of human history is the reconstitution of a united community. This is our task to-day. It is an enormous task which at times seems overwhelming. It demands constant effort to search for peace and collaboration between

peoples. It sends us back to the experience of *God who saves in weakness*. It is what we see daily in the lives of families, groups and migrants ...

To continue this journey, we would like to say

that these few traits and many more relative to our spirituality came to us across the generations, thanks to the lives of our sisters, of communities. They are also enriched by the contributions from the laity who are part of our daily life and through the spirit of the Assumption.

Etienne Pernet said: *“A spirit is difficult to define: it is so subtle. Each congregation has their own. We must submit to it: rather than knowing how to define it, it must be breathed, received, penetrated with it. Otherwise we die”.* (20-1-1880 X,54)

Etienne Pernet wanted the congregation to be grafted on to the Assumption with specific characteristics of its own. (A l’origine d’une spiritualité des Petites Soeurs de l’Assomption-Points de Repères – Sr Gisèle Marchand p. 49-50)

We are of the Assumption: “Following our Saviour and with him, our objective is the glory of God, the honour of the Blessed Virgin, the triumph of the Church and the salvation of souls. You know very well, this is the spirit of the Assumption and we must not look anything else”. (23-9-1897 VII,127).

We have our own specific traits. “The order of the Assumption is a trunk with many branches. Let us remain united with the trunk and be content with our place. In a border, the daisy does not want to be a rose: each flower keeps its own physiognomy”. (28-8-1880 IX, 466).

We are Among the poor. “The glory of God and the spreading of his Kingdom must be the aim of our lives as it is for the Assumption”. (31-7-1881 IX 583). “The Little Sisters of the Assumption will contribute to the spread of the Kingdom by being dedicated to the worker and the poor”. (1st Rule of Life – Aim of the Congregation)

Father Pernet made his own, the Spirit of the Assumption. He was imbued with it. At the same time and with Antoinette Fage, he interiorised their personal grace as founder and foundress. From there arises the originality of our spirituality.

Antoinette Fage said: “Be courageous, strong, generous. Love God ... be holy. Remain united to the family of the Assumption which has always been very dedicated to us. Be united to it as we have always been – and even more so if possible” (ART – Vie de la M..Marie de Jesus p. 504)

“I only want to know God, to love Him and to serve Him.”
Antoinette Fage (26.06.1864)

“My God unite all minds in truth
and all hearts in charity.”
Etienne Pernet

ORANTES OF THE ASSUMPTION

S. Anne Huyghebaert, Or.A.

After a lengthy gestation period, the Orantes of the Assumption were founded on 8 December 1896 in Passy (Paris) by Isabelle de Clermont-Tonnerre, countess of Ursel, and by François Picard, a.a..

Isabelle de Clermont-Tonnerre, countess of Ursel (1849-1921)

Born in Glisolles (Eure-France), a member of the aristocracy, Isabelle gave herself entirely to God in a contemplative life that was humble and hidden but at the same time attentive to those who were marked by material or spiritual poverty. She situates the origin of her vocation to about the time when she was 14 years old, but realizing this vocation came late after a long process of clarification and purification.

At 20 years of age, Isabelle thought of joining the Daughters of Charity, but then abandoned that idea. After a great deal of hesitation, she was married in 1873 and was happy...for a time, since she became a widow in 1875. Convinced that “God claims his rights”, she made a vow of chastity and consecrated herself to God after having educated her daughter.

She became a tertiary in October of 1876 and prepared to join the Assumption and live in the community of Cannes as of 1880. Six years later, she realizes she is called to live the contemplative life. These first insights will lead her to found our Institute of contemplative life ten years later, when she was 47 years old.

To the end and not without a good deal of struggle, Isabelle’s spiritual life will continue to deepen through trials and graces. From 1872 on, Father François Picard is the privileged witness of this spiritual journey. When in 1886, Isabelle communicated to him her first thoughts regarding a contemplative work to be founded, he had already been thinking of this secretly for many years.

François Picard (1831-1903)

Father Picard was born in St Gervasy (Gard-France) of farming parents. He discovered the Assumption at the college in Nîmes where he becomes a novice in 1850 at the moment when the first Assumptionists make profession of vows. Father d’Alzon had already become aware of his abilities. In 1880, he succeeds him as Superior General of the Augustinians of the Assumption.

He is known especially for his many accomplishments, as well as for his leadership qualities, but his true personal charism is the unity of prayer and action. Once assured of the will of God, his faith pushed him to be daring: the launching of pilgrimages, the founding of the daily newspaper *La Croix* or of social works or foreign missions. The projects he launches or for which he takes responsibility are first of all acts of obedience and of faith.

Because he is certain that the foundation of an Institute for prayer in the Assumption is in keeping with God’s will, he assures its creation in 1896, when he is 65 years old. He is not daunted by difficulties nor the lack of members. In suggesting the name of Orantes to the sisters, Father Picard associates them to the life of prayer and offering for which they were founded, at a time when religious life is being persecuted and is forced to seek refuge like in the times of the catacombs.

“Prayer, this is your life, your strength, your light.” – “The spirit of the Assumption, which you should possess, is a spirit of apostolate and of prayer.”

Developments

At the death of the founder in 1903, his personal secretary, Father André Jaujou, a.a., succeeds him in accompanying the Orantes. Always self-effacing, the foundress is grateful to him for continuing the teaching and the spirit of Father Picard, but in conscience she is determined to resist whatever she considers to be contrary to the spirit of the work. In the ensuing years, she evolves and continues to react or nuance her positions on a few points on which they diverge. When she dies in 1921, a change of direction occurs. Structures and forms favoring more withdrawal and a cloistered life are adopted. Forty years later, when the Church of Vatican II asked that Congregations rediscover their original charism, the Orantes abandoned the choir habit and took up once again a presence in the world, “prayer always remaining the priority.”

Today

Established first of all in France, Belgium and Argentina, the Orantes of the Assumption are today mostly present in Africa (West, Central and East) and Madagascar. With an Augustinian spirituality, based on the unity between love of God and love of neighbor, they lead a contemplative life in fraternal communities, joining together prayer and presence to people, withdrawal and solidarity. Prayer, adoration, liturgy, meditation of the Word of God fill their days, together with time given to community as well as part-time work in keeping with the abilities of the sisters and some services. While enabling them to earn their living, this makes it possible for them to be prayer among men and in solidarity with those that surround them, in the simplicity of their daily life. The Eucharist, a mystery of offering, of community, of sharing has its place in this setting.

Each community embodies this common spirit in the diverse ways they choose, depending on the local setting and the project of each insertion.

A life “broken one hundred times” becomes one given, eucharistic life

“It would seem that my life had been broken a hundred times... that the Providence of God was absent... And on the contrary...this Providence has taken back all of its rights over me, by breaking my life, that is true, but **what is a broken life in comparison to belonging to God alone?**” (1888)

When Isabelle wrote these lines, which will remain true to the end of her life, she had already written a few months earlier her first ideas about the work to be founded. In fact, trials follow upon each other during her life. Though she always fears them, she receives them and allows them to enable God to continue guiding her and leading her to graces and to a life of union with Him, often in obscure ways. She would not have it otherwise, but surely does not seek these kinds of trials, inasmuch as they are dreadful and her positive nature leads her to fear “everything that resembles the extraordinary” and “to become subject to illusions.”

The first illusion against which she must struggle, is to want to be a saint by her own efforts: after all, is she not in the lineage of St. Bernard and of St. Jeanne de Chantal? Non, says the Lord... You must before all else seek God for God: “Do not ask for holiness, have only myself in your sights.” It is clearly towards union, as spouse, that he wants to lead her, but only on condition that she forgets herself... And the fact is, she is a great lady, and it would seem that everything was aiming to make her humble. We are reminded of some events of her life:

The **death of her father**, three months after Isabelle’s birth, 6 March 1849, did not affect her directly. Her early childhood at the paternal chateau was happy; she was raised by her

mother, from whose absences she suffers, by her paternal grandparents and by a governess. She is attached to them all and shows herself to be a loving child, while being at the same time of a passionate, lively and willful temperament. This last trait, oriented toward the good, helps greatly to correct herself and to let herself be formed: fits of anger and the endless chatter of a child, but also a natural impatience against which she will struggle all her life, most often by smiling and not revealing what is transpiring inside.

Soon, living in Paris with her mother distances her from her grandparents, but from now on Isabelle will be totally taken up with the first steps of her Christian life, which she will prepare and live with surprising seriousness. Her gravity is not at all morose: “She is a delicious child” with a tender heart full of intelligence and already “one takes pleasure working with her.”

When she is 13 years old, **her mother marries once again** with a friend of her father’s who already has five children. Isabelle, passionate and total in her affections, experiences considerable suffering. Then the death of her dear governess in the same month brings yet another source of pain. Yet she will be able to forget herself to think only of her mother and suppress her feelings. This sacrifice offered in the day-to-day of family living overwhelms her and at the same time helps her to grow. The veil of secret sadness that sometimes fills her heart matches the austere surroundings of the fortified castle of Feugerolles (Loire-France) where she will spend her youthful years from that time forward. Long live sun-filled days, family outings and the joys of village visits, about which more later!

In 1869, **thinking about her future**, she considering joining the Daughters of Charity, then surrenders that idea because of her health. The desire to find the place where she can belong to God, “given entirely” and responding to her “attraction for the poor” remains, but she finally marries in 1873. “Except for one another, we hesitated to stay in the world or to give ourselves to God”, she says. Together they enjoy the perfect happiness of a Christian couple, satisfied and full of promise... but all of that disappears when Henri d’Ursel, her husband, falls sick. Their great love inspires detachment, each desire nothing other than the good of the other. Henri dies in September of 1875. At 26 years old, she is the young mother of 8 month old Caroline.

On this foundation of love and sure that “God reclaims his rights” Isabelle immediately makes a vow of chastity and consecrates herself to God as soon as her daughter no longer needs her. The Lord makes her understand that he is the only and unique Spouse, with exclusive rights to her heart. That is not evident to her... Henri still occupies an important place! After a long struggle, marked by many graces and cares on the part of the Lord, Isabelle gives her assent – “Then let everything be in common between us!...”

From 1880 to 1888, she is a **tertiary at Cannes** among the Religious Sisters of the Assumption, preparing during a period of six years to become one of them after the education of her daughter. In 1886, Isabelle undergoes yet other trials: the serious illness of her daughter, the departure of the Superior of Cannes to whom she was close, tension among the Religious Sisters of the Assumption and Father Picard, who decides to withdraw... It is difficult for Isabelle to figure out the meaning of these experiences and their consequences. However, with or without a cause-effect relationship, the plan to enter the Assumption that she had thought to be clear was also disappearing. “Once again, everything is broken... I sense now that God wants something different from me.” At the heart of her disappointment, there grows an inner call to become a person of prayer shaped by the Paschal mystery. She perceives **a call to the contemplative life**, about which she describes her first intuitions:

“First of all, Jesus Christ, life, blood and strength of every undertaking, therefore a contemplative Order, making of prayer first of all, and then of religious study the

foundation of its existence... Prayer: first duty, by means of adoration, meditation, the great Office. Study, having God as unique goal...for they will be apostles, apostles by their prayer, apostles also by means of exterior works – limited so that prayer be always the first of their works and also diverse...” The “confraternity of the work” with the Assumption is an evidence for her. She adds in a way that is surprising for that time: “We will have no Lay Sisters.”

Other **trials** are added to these visible ones :

On the one hand, many temptations torment her, against purity or against faith and, even more, temptations of pride, which for a long time had been her great struggle.

On the other, she suffered from the disapproval of her family in the face of her inconceivable ideas. “Crazy, exalted, without any family spirit...” Many criticisms... and for her loving heart, the most difficult thing is to make her loved ones suffer.

Finally, the Lord tests her love for him: he asks her, as his spouse, to share his own sufferings for the salvation of souls: “Your martyrdom will be long, you are only at the beginning.” She is entirely free to accept or not, for love never obliges. But she wants to refuse nothing and accepts every dark night that has been foreseen, in the weariness, the anguish, the worst temptations. When she was 30 years old, the Lord accepted her lovingly as “victim” (total offering of self united with the love and the sufferings of Christ’s in his Pasch), and she will be identified more and more to the mystery of Gethsemane. “Sometimes it seems to me that I am at the end of my strength and I find no way out but the well or the window. It is unbelievable how much one comes to understand suicide.” But then she pulls back immediately: “I surrender myself, the gift has to be remade, I will surrender myself again.”

In May of 1888, after her definitive departure from Cannes, Isabelle spend time with Caroline at Lourdes, and makes the effort to continue her life of prayer. Each night, in her villa “Solitude”, she gets up to give at least a moment to prayer. She appreciates this experience and would like to pursue it:

“I will have to accustom myself to getting up at night, if we decide to adopt this, and we must certainly do so. That is the best time to atone for one’s sin and to offer oneself to God as a victim.”

Taking up once again her **life as a widow and mother** in the world, Isabelle lives from now on in Belgium, at Hingene or Brussels, on family properties where she is never quite at home. It would seem that this is a period of depression for her, a consequence of her decide not to enter the Assumption and of her fear in the face of the life to which she senses an interior call. Once she gives her assent to the idea of going ahead with a foundation, Isabelle will once again find her health and, for a period of ten years, will let herself gently and progressively be taught by the Lord regard this contemplative life to be established.

In the mundane life that is hers, each day offers Isabelle many opportunities for offering herself and for putting her resolution into practice: “The more I suffer, the more I will try to be happy, patient, lovable in order not to force others to carry the burden of my suffering.” No one doubts the spiritual path that she is travelling: it is so normal to see her being attentive to everything and ready to serve in any way, to do whatever is asked of her, especially since, by temperament, she is rather a woman of action!

From 1896 to 1921, in **her life as foundress**, difficulties are not lacking, but she continues to walk, even when everything seems lost. Take for example the material destitution and

affective deprivation at the time of the foundation in a very poor setting; the period when she was alone, when the candidates that were expected are either delayed or fail in their resolve; the persecutions and their numerous consequences, among which was the need to foresee a difficult future while at the same time remaining hidden and presenting themselves as “the countess of Ursel and the ladies in her company”; and then the way of exile in 1914; the ravages of the “Spanish sickness” that decimates the ranks... Interior darkness especially is not lacking.

From 1913, an habitual state of aridity, borne “for souls”, coexists at times with deep graces of union:

“Ma life of aridity is always the same, but it is a way of surrender to the desires of God. I do not see my way clearly, but it seems to me that to the black fog of the past there has succeeded a kind of white fog of the Northern countries: one does not see four steps ahead, but one senses the rays of sunlight that will shine in the afternoon.”

On the morning of 3 July 1921, Mother Isabelle is in agony. After a few tender words, she adds: **“How happy we are to go to heaven!”** And we hear these words, almost like an echo of those of 1888: **“What is a broken life in comparison to belonging to God alone?”**

It is only long **after the death of Isabelle** that her profound life is revealed through her correspondence with Father Picard... and it is astonishing for the sisters who, each day at recreation, enjoyed so much her playful enthusiasm and her fraternal attention.

As much in regard to her sister-in-law, Antonine, when she attempted to imitate her, as in her role as foundress, Isabelle was always aware that these spiritual ways were proper to her. Respectful of the plan of God for each person, she did not project her mystery of Gethsemane on the sisters: she is likewise open to receiving vocations marked by the joyful or glorious mysteries. Nonetheless, she notes that the vocation of the Orante is illumined by the interior notion of what is learned “in the garden of olives”:

“When I see in souls something of the marks of this mystery, I experience a real joy because I sense that they are in their true vocation. But every vocation is true and the Spirit blows where He will. Nonetheless it always seems to me those who do not have, in the deepest recesses of their heart, some notion of these mysteries, have not yet received the complete notion of the vocation of an Orante. With regard to myself, to surrender myself so that he can do what he will, that is my entire prayer.”

For 25 years, her community has not the least doubt that she is the foundress, including her very first inspirations. In her self-effacing way, Mother Isabelle does not however refuse this truth of which she is conscious. In 1891, going beyond the beginnings—that reveal themselves to be so modest and so slow!—she notes: “He wants the Congregation to which he has given me to spread through the whole world.”

A defining discovery of poverty

“God is patient with souls. For thirty years he constantly makes me feel that one day I will belong entirely to him and that through the vicissitudes of my life he has led me to the goal that he alone knew...” (1893)

These lines date from the origins of the vocation of Mother Isabelle in 1863. Following upon the remarriage of her mother (November, 1862), she moved to the fortress of Feugerolles, set on high, which as a youngster she enjoyed leaving behind in order to visit Chambron, below in the industrial valley dominated by the chateau. In the town darkened by its factories, Isabelle

does not look for extravagant distractions: participate in the month of Mary devotions in the church, help prepare the repositories, tend to sales and beg for the poor... For “this is the country of coal, of mines, of factories, of chimneys.” And she sees their children at work, social inequality, and the poverty and misery that accompanied the beginning of industrialization. It was a shock for her.

To the affective shock she had suffered, she responded by forgetting herself for the sake of her mother. Matured by trials, the heart of Isabelle was now opening itself to a reality bigger than her family, and confronted with this cultural shock she once again responds with the gift of herself, along with a concrete compassion and commitment to the poor that she meets. That may also be the place where her desire and deep awareness of humility is rooted, coupled with a growing awareness of the primacy of God (alone worthy of reigning on high, and doing so much better than the feudal lords of old in her chateau...). The main ingredients of her spiritual path and of her vocation are to be found there, but during her whole life these elements will be combined in evolving ways, and the response to be given in first place will vary.

Her **human and compassionate response** will be first of all to respond herself in concrete ways to the situations of poverty and inequality that she encounters by the gift of self to people and through various works. Thus, as often as she can, Isabelle will collaborate with the Sisters of Saint Vincent de Paul, who were very active in the village, helping them in one or another of their works.

A few years later, she will give priority to God when she expresses the vocation that she was seeking to live:

“...the more I belong to God, the more I am given entirely to him, the happier I will be. I do not feel attracted to any order in particular... I am trying to see in which order I would find my attraction to the poor, an entire surrender of myself and of my faults and at the same time finding no hindrance in terms of my health...” (1872, to Father Picard)

Once married, then widowed, the love of the poor remains, and the “works of mercy” retain an important place in her heart, her time, her active involvement and the revenues of her fortune. She often generously supports very diverse projects and people, including those of the **Assumption and other Church realities**, which become more and more a part of her good deeds. Having become a “lady of good works”, she avoids the bad side by her humility and her authentic compassion, one of the consequences of which is that she does not hesitate to roll up her own sleeves... We have already seen the kind of spiritual motivation behind all of this. Aware of her own growth in this regard, she notes in 1888:

“[The works] have not lost their appeal; however, I sense now that God wants something else from me, and I can get involved without giving myself totally to them. They can and should occupy me on occasion, but they should not be my goal, but a means, and as much as I can manage a passing and transitory means... Ten years ago, things were different; my life was made up of such things.”

8 December 1896: If the foundation, marked by great poverty, gave great joy to Father Picard, in Sister Isabelle, it is especially her complete self-effacement that is striking.

“What makes my desolation complete is when people speak of ‘the work of Madame d’Ursel’ as if I were something and even the first in the work.”

Having become an Orante, her response is and will more and more be that of the contemplative life and the **offering of self through spiritual compassion and reparation**. But the thought of the poor and meeting them are not for that reason to be neglected:

“They should always remember to show in one way or another mercy for the poor and the small...” (Project for Constitutions, 1906)

“I do not at all want us to become active religious. That is not our goal, nor God’s call for us. But sometimes I ask myself if we love the poor enough. Do not refuse, by this means among others, to go to Jesus Christ.” (1913)

In her growth, generosity and the relationship to exterior and interior poverty seem to me to constitute a special place that “says” something of Isabelle’s stages of development. Each stage appears without eliminating the one before:

A HUMANITARIAN PLACE OF COMPASSION

A PLACE OF APOSTOLIC COMMUNION

A PLACE OF FAITH AND THE PRIMARY OF GOD

Encounter with Father Picard and a line of founders

In 1872, when Isabelle was hesitating between marriage and religious life, an aunt introduced her to Father François Picard, whose abilities in spiritual direction were known and whose confessional at François I^{er} was as busy as that of Father Pernet.

With a great deal of candor and lucidity, Isabelle confided herself to his guidance without reserve. Her attitude and the sure direction that that made possible, provided a solid support that would be important for her journey and decisive for our foundation. This path of grace continued until 1903, most often by means of a substantial correspondence. The usually brief answers provided by Father Picard are marked by wisdom. He provides peace and guides with frankness; he also encourages without weakness and provides light for the workings of god. For both of them, the only thing important was to acknowledge the will of god and its fulfillment.

In December of 1877, when she joined the Third Order of the Assumption, Isabelle made a vow of obedience to Father Picard. She will be greatly helped in what was to follow.

By means of the direction he provided, Father Picard formed her in the spirit of the Assumption. He encouraged to be ever more generous and to love in a way ever more faithful and purified for the Lord. He supported her in her intimate struggles and terrible moral sufferings, but is never distracted by her complaints, however understandable they were given the demands of the journey. Given the extraordinary and sometimes frightening paths that she walked, thanks to what was said to her or transmitted through prayer, Isabelle fortunately received wise and enlightened accompaniment along the ways of God and the mystical life. At the end of her life, she herself expressed astonishment at the road that she was helped to travel by Father Picard.

It cannot be denied that this encounter and the direction provided by Father Picard were for Isabelle a most important and foundational experience. It was also the first means by which he contributed fully to the foundation of the Orantes of the Assumption.

With regard to this **common project**, they both had separate inspirations. Father Picard situates his own in 1882, the year of the accident (see the account of this elsewhere), which disabled him and other powerful events that could have contributed to the conversion about which we have a number of witnesses. Having become more concretely aware that “God is the master”, he orients his thoughts, his being, his acts, and his abilities to a more constant search for union with God and with his will. This moves him to welcome realities, which do not

depend on him, even the most disagreeable, as coming from the hand of God, and this bring him serenity, noticeable to others. A few months later, during the first pilgrimage to Jerusalem, the mystery of *voluntas tua* was already what most impressed him: “At Gethsemane I left my heart.” This place had thus marked both of our founders.

Other **points of convergence** deeply influenced our origins. First, the Cross of course, to which François had been close from his early years and which accompanied him in all of his work; the cross that so much marked the life and prayer of Isabelle; the cross that “weighted heavily”, but “attracted more grace”; the cross “truth that saves” and that “draws us close to our Lord”; the cross of the redemption and of the paschal mystery. We know that both wanted only the will of God, to belong to him, to obey him, to be given to him totally. And that could happen only in humility, frankness and faith without reserve. The primacy of God that Isabelle felt from her youth resembled the spirituality of the “rights of God” carried by Father Picard. It is from him that Isabelle learns the love of the Church and adopts it as her own. Finally, on the basis of very different personal experiences, the love of poverty and of the poor strongly marked both of them and reinforced their desire for simplicity.

For this work, about which he was certain that God desired it, Father Picard had great confidence in God and confidence also in the foundress. They enjoyed between themselves a deep communion in mutual respect and admiration, as well as a perfect agreement in their thinking, which confirmed and strengthened the founding insights:

“In insist on telling you of the great joy I feel as I hear you speak of the spirit of our work in such perfect conformity with everything that for a few years I have received in prayer on this subject. I would have been unable to say it in that way, but it is the development, the explanation, the fulfillment of everything that is in my soul regarding this work. I do not understand it differently, and I understand it only in this way.”

This **deep agreement** provides Mother Isabelle with a reference point that confirms her in her thinking as foundress and on which she relies once Father Picard had died. In particular, she cites:

- His openness to her first intuitions on the future to be foreseen and what he says to her regarding her first thoughts about the work: “I tell you for your own consolation, this is what I was expecting; I knew beforehand what you would be writing.”
- The love of the poor, the desire to “impart God to souls” and the future possibility of harmonizing prayer and limited works: “I do not like devotions that turn souls onto themselves. Forget yourself!”
- The place and importance of study to nourish prayer and the place of the apostolate that might be requested.

Finally, **the understanding that characterizes Isabelle’s relations with the Assumption** is in itself foundational. To different degrees, she knew and always remained in communion with and supportive of the Congregations of the Assumption. Each of these provided her with a vital support for the foundation of the Orantes (see Annex). And for her, it was natural to support their work, especially by the offering of apostolic prayer, and to think of the “confraternity of work” as evident. This remains an important dimension of our mission as Orantes and corresponds to the experience of many among us.

“**This is how we support one another.**” (Fr. Picard, concluding his vision of the Assumption when our foundation was announced in 1896)

APPENDIX:

We have seen how well Isabelle was welcomed by Mère Marie Eugénie and the Religious Sisters of the Assumption and especially how much she was immersed and was formed in the common spirit of the Assumption. The trials and difficulties that she encountered, as well as her departure from Cannes did not break the relations that had been created, and mutual support would be practice until the end. The spiritual heritage especially left its mark.

Isabelle was familiar with Augustine already with her husband to the point of reading the Latin text together with him. The dimension of the common life that she adopted as tertiary was an opportunity to practice and deepen the spirit of charity in humility.

More than anything, the Eucharistic adoration that she experienced at Cannes kept for her, and for us, a central place that was then deployed and probably re-explicitated with specific emphases, such as a life given, apostolic prayer and reparation. From this point of view, we are sometimes considered “twins”; it would be interesting to deepen this common point in our charisms.

Isabelle’s retreat notes tell us that her spiritual roots are marked by liturgical, Augustinian, alzonian and ignatian references, and from these the Lord led her along her own path. Acquainted formed by the Assumptionists and acquainted with them and with the Oblates of the Assumption are undoubtedly at the origin of these elements.

The Oblates of the Assumption, to whom Isabelle drew close especially after 1886, greatly contributed to our foundation and to the formation of the first sisters. The beginning community was received at the novitiate of the Oblates of Paris. Until February of 1899, she had Mother Marie de la Compassion, a beloved Oblate, as Superior, forming them to the practice and usages of religious life. The Orantes follow a large number of the conferences given to the Oblates. There too, mutual support was not lacking afterwards, especially during the period of persecutions.

It should be noted that following upon the meeting with Father Picard in 1872, Mère Isabelle came to know and frequent the Little Sisters of the Assumption. We do not know how often, nor do we know the impact these visits had, but we imagine she must have recognized among them her “attraction to the poor”. Later, their first constitutions served as a model for Mère Isabelle in her thinking and work on our own. We have a certain number of passages in common.

CHAPTER 3 – The Experience of Some Participants

The principal talks clarified the way in which the charisms of our Congregations are rooted in the human and spiritual experience of our founders. What can be said with regard to their disciples? What is the relationship today between the charism and individual experience? At what point is there an encounter between us and the charism; how does it shape us? And once this experience has been internalized does it contribute to the life and transmission of the charism?

To address these questions, each participant was invited to share with the other members of his/her Congregation a significant part of the human and spiritual experience that marked his/her itinerary as a religious. To help present this, each one used a Congregation text that is for him/her foundational and that expresses his/her own experience. Some of those who participated in this process committed their own thoughts to paper.

A Religious of the Assumption

The conversation that we had regarding our human and spiritual experience during the course of our vocational journey was important for me. It helped me deepen a conviction: when the Lord calls us to religious life in a particular Congregation, he places in our heart the charism of that Congregation. During our initial formation, we discover little by little that our deepest desires correspond to the spiritual identity of our Congregation, i.e. its charism. Our sense of belonging arises from this discovery. Our whole life long, this discovery is renewed and strengthened in us. Preparing for this time together, before the session, and the conversation itself have renewed this conviction in me.

The texts that I chose affirm what has always been the center of my spiritual experience, **the mystery of the Incarnation**. Here are two of these:

“The incarnation is the mystery for which they should all have a special devotion, since it is in this mystery that all human affairs are divinized and find their end.” (Marie Eugénie de Jésus, letter to Fr. d’Alzon, 12/09/1843)

“Jesus Christ, the eternal Word, sent by the Father and consecrated by the Spirit, was made flesh and established his dwelling among us. Son of God and Son of his People, he entered into the history of man, following the same path as his brothers, announcing the Good News to the poor. To gather into one People all the dispersed children of God, he brought about Peace by the blood of his Cross. And so God made him Lord to the praise of his Glory. Adorer of the Father and savior of men in one movement of filial love, Christ calls the Religious of the Assumption to live this love at the heart of the Church.” (Rule of Life, Introduction)

Since my novitiate year, during my studies and for my whole life, the contemplation of God who became man for love of us has remained at the center of my prayer, as well as of my decisions and my action. For me, the Incarnation summarizes God’s way of acting. I believe in a God who is love, and who by love has drawn close to our humanity. He became so close that he became one of us. He assumed out of love all of our human reality: our history and our life, with its sorrows and its joys.

Marie-Euénie says that in this mystery “everything human has been divinized”. This is the “admirable exchange” that the Christmas liturgy invites us to praise. Since God has assumed our humanity, our reality has been made capable of manifesting the divine. God comes to us and reveals Himself to us in what is human. This coming of the divine in the human has always been for me a source of wonder and a call. The preferential option for the poor, involvement in the struggle for human rights, the cause of the defense of life – all of that has its theological and spiritual roots in the mystery of the Incarnation. It is God himself that is there among the poor and the excluded, in the one whose rights are denied and whose life is threatened. God is there too in the beauty and in the goodness of people, a reflection of what He is. All of these realities make me experience the presence of God.

For a good part of my religious life, I’ve lived in communities inserted into poor neighborhoods. Sharing in the difficulties of people, nurturing their faith and being nurtured in my own by their witness, I was able almost to touch the presence of the Lord in the simple and concrete facts of life. I saw the signs of the Kingdom being revealed in them. And in that setting I was able to live powerful ecclesial experiences.

The ecclesial dimension is likewise present in the last excerpt that I am quoting. With this dimension, we touch upon a second aspect of the charism that has a great importance in my life. I lived the Council very intensely, first as a Junior sister because I had the grace to have as theology teachers some of the Council’s “periti”, then, on my return to Brazil, by immersion, getting involved in a Church that was living the reception of the Council at a deep level. This experience of a conciliar Church, renewed by the breath of the Spirit, courageous and prophetic, marked me for life.

The fact that I was able to find in this experience traces of our charism made me very happy. For, yes, to recognize in my own life traces of the charism that Marie Eugénie gave us as our heritage is a strength, a joy, a confirmation of a whole journey of responses to the calls of the Lord.

Regina Maria CAVALCANTI, r.a., Rio de Janeiro, 17 January 2009

An Augustinian of the Assumption

After the formal presentations, we were invited to become more personally involved, but in no less rich a manner. This allowed us to become more concretely aware of the action of God over time. I sensed a great sense of gratitude toward Him for his call to call and to grow in this Assumption family, which is my own. It was also very moving and beautiful to listen to my brothers. By the fact of telling our vocation story, each brother became a living story, which is also a holy story because God is at work.

I felt very comfortable and happy in this exchange. Despite the age differences, as well as differences of culture and geographic origin (America, Eastern Europe, Asia) and training, we agreed on a number of things: the importance of truth and of freedom, confidence as a stimulant for responsibility, the family spirit and the witness of simplicity in our relations. A Superior to whom we can be entirely frank without everything collapsing around us, who washes the dishes like anyone else, who does not cultivate distance in order to protect his authority...

It would take too long to recount everything that we talked about, and in any case it's better to live that oneself. May these lines be an invitation or a provocation to participate in a similar kind of exchange.

The text I chose is a passage entitled "Disinterested like every authentic love", an extract of a talk that Emmanuel d'Alzon gave at the close of the General Chapter of 1868:

"Finally, our love is disinterested. I don't dare say chivalrous, like that of all great religious institutions at their beginnings. It is sad to see how much man hurries to make his own the little bit of good he is capable of doing, how much he aspires to be the only one doing it, and to prevent others from doing it when he cannot do it himself. My Brothers, may this never be our temptation! Let us love the Church enough to rejoice about all the good her children do for her triumph. Let us exclude no form of holiness nor of charity. We cannot make them all our own. Let us love, admire, encourage in others what we ourselves are incapable of. May the general good be our sole preoccupation. Let us say like Moses, "If only the whole people of Yahweh were prophets!" (Numbers 11:29). The victories of the Church would be more numerous and our love for her more consoling, if we left aside mean and personal considerations and made the triumph of the Church the exclusive desire of our hearts. I cannot recommend enough to you this unselfish love. If you tell me that it is rare, I repeat that in possessing it in all its breadth and generosity we will be more easily distinguished and recognizable on the road that we wish to walk.

Let us love the Church supernaturally, boldly, and generously, and you will see what blessings here below and what rewards in heaven God has prepared for our work. And if we are not found to be very clever, the way certain people are, at least we will not have to blush because of our motives."

In this text Father d'Alzon speaks of the spirit of the Assumption. He emphasizes as a characteristic of our spirit, generosity and disinterestedness, especially in the face of the good that we are asked to realize. *Utinam et omnes prophetent.* In this passage I discover a summary of the way the Assumption has always been toward me.

These are not just words; they are day to day facts. Disinterestedness, truth, confidence that leads to responsibility: this is how the Assumption has been in my regard. I see the active presence of Jesus Christ making present the Kingdom that the Father entrusted to Him for our sake. I doubt that I have always responded to this generosity and this disinterestedness, but it is clear that this has been present to me for my entire life. I have done my best to adopt this attitude myself and to act in turn in the same way.

Talking with my brothers has helped me to see that in their lives it has been like this as well. To live and to relive this charism always leads me to be more thankful to the Lord and to give thanks to Him for each brother, and they are numerous, whom He has placed on my path and through whom this spirit of life that we call the charism or the spirit of the Assumption has been revealed to me. They had assimilated this way of life, and I am called to continue that movement today.

The more I know it, the more the spirit of the Assumption fills me to the brim. A certain modesty, a certain naturalness, not to boast about what is ours, to be able to appreciate the good of others with disinterestedness and nobility... These are the details that might seem superficial, but that say what I believe to be particular to our character (...)

Tomás GONZALEZ, a.a., Bogotá, 12 January 2009

An Oblate of the Assumption

The fact that we came together to talk simply about our experience and our journey was very important. We all have the same desire to serve God by serving others, it was time now to listen to each other. The Lord is at work in our different experiences, and it is very stimulating to listen to the witness of another, to read their life in the light of our charism.

“Our spirit is most especially summed up in a very ardent love of Our Lord Jesus Christ and of his Blessed Mother, our special patron, a great zeal for the Church, and an unshakable attachment to the Holy See. Our life should be a life of faith, of dedication, of sacrifice, of prayer, of apostolic spirit and of frankness.” (*Écrits spirituels*, p. 648)

Religious life has three main elements: community, prayer, mission.

By means of the text I chose, it is important to underline a great love for prayer, the essential element of our life. By abandoning myself to the Lord, I must always be attentive to keep action and contemplation closely united. Because of the many demands from outside, I risk drowning in “activism”.

Community entrusts a mission to us; we must share with the community our approaches and our plans.

One of the aspects of living the charism today is to share the mission with lay people.

Judith BALIKWISHA, o.a., Paris, 17 January 2009.

A Little Sister of the Assumption

As I reflect on the four days we spent together as members of the five Assumptionist Congregations, two images come to my mind. The first is that of the tabernacle in the house of the Augustinians of the Assumption in Rome where the workshop was held. The form of the tabernacle reminds us of the well where Jesus came to be refreshed and nourished and where he met the Samaritan woman. On the door of the tabernacle the words *Adveniat Regnum Tuum* are inscribed.

This workshop was like returning to the well from which we are nourished, “the well” of the Assumptionist Charism. Here I had the opportunity to learn about the other Congregations in the Assumptionist family. I learned how we share a common language and that the same things are important to us, even though the manner in which we live them out and the emphasis we put on them is different in each Congregation.

We each spoke of Incarnation, the Reign of God, the Eucharist, the Church, Education, Prayer, the Poor, transforming or re-making Society, and religious life as a “prophetic force”. These are words, concepts and realities which we are all familiar with in our congregational writings.

Recognizing these common traits as we listened to the stories of our Founders and Foundresses, and as we listened to each others’ stories gave me a sense of belonging to a family much larger than my own Congregation, and at the same time confirmed for me my own vocation as a Little Sister of the Assumption. I was challenged to clarify for myself and

for others what it is that we hold in common with other Congregations and what it is that distinguishes us.

There is the temptation to think that my own Congregation best expresses the Assumptionist Charism, but as I heard the individual stories of those men and women who were led to found our different Congregations, and also to how each of us lives as members of her or his own Congregation today, I realized that we each express the Charism in a different way, that we listen to and respond to the cries of God's people today in different ways. We were reminded that no one Congregation fully expresses the Assumptionist Charism.

The text which I had chosen to bring to the Workshop is from the Rule of Life of the Little Sisters of the Assumption.

Seeing at first hand the destitution of the working class of his time, Etienne Pernet became intuitively aware of an evangelical response to it : to bear witness to the father's love among the poor, the workers and their families by means of an attentive presence and simple acts of service. (# 3)

... The breaking of bread carries with it an obligation to share with all who hunger for bread and for justice... (# 11)

Following the example of Jesus who came to dwell among us, who lived a poor life, worked with his hands, and announced the Good News through the simplest realities – bread, water, light, healing, life and death -, we ourselves wish to show forth the Father's love in the actions of everyday life. (# 18)

These passages from the Rule of Life contain for me what I feel is at the heart of the Charism of my Congregation... to believe that by simple acts of service and attentive presence we can bring God's love to the poor and experience the God who saves in weakness. Our lives are Eucharistic lives – lived by sharing life , by allowing ourselves to be transformed and to work for the transformation of society.

During the workshop I experienced the different emphases which we all placed on the Eucharist and on our place in the Church. This was a challenge for me and called me to deepen my own understanding of both these mysteries.

I would like to suggest that we could have further workshops on the different facets of the Assumption Charism. We could take, for example, The Church, The Eucharist, The Incarnation, or The Transformation of Society, and explore together what these mean to us as Assumptionists and how we integrate them into our lives. This could broaden our understanding, enrich and unify us so that Assumption can be a prophetic voice in the world.

Carmel MOLLOY, l.s.a., Ireland, 16 January 2009

An Orante of the Assumption

We began our exchange by talking about the concrete reality of our life and our vocation experience, which we shared in great fraternal simplicity. Each one was drawn by a particular aspect, which I found especially enriching. I appreciated the way our different responses complemented each other's perspective on the charism of the Congregation.

The texts that I chose on prayer and on mission spoke to me in an entirely new way. I understood that I am called to renew my “yes” continually and to deepen my understanding of the elements that constitute our charism. Our conversation on the various texts gave them more depth and helped me rediscover certain words (recollection, hidden life, union). This challenged me to go beyond written texts, to actualize them and make them my own, so that with the help of God’s grace I can live them in a new way.

This process of personal renewal nicely complements the process of re-appropriating the charism of the Assumption. I am discovering a great number of common elements in the charisms of our five branches of the family. Lived in different ways in each Congregation, they are not contradictory but complementary. Living them together, turned toward God for the extension of the Kingdom, witnesses to the spiritual strength in our family.

Based on the diversity of our different histories and emphases, being able to recognize our unity in the mosaic of the texts we selected was a beautiful experience. We articulated this unity in terms of four themes:

- “In the Church and in the Assumption...”
...we are a Congregation of contemplative life (Rule of Life, #1)
- “I wanted to teach you to be *orante* always...” (M. Isabelle, 1915)
Everything should lead you to an interior recollection that speaks to God, that acts for God, that listens to God. (Fr. Picard, 1896)
A soul of prayer is a soul detached from itself...allowing God to act in all things according to His will. (M. Isabelle, 1897)
- “The mystery of the Eucharist is the one to which I invite you the most.” (Fr. Picard, 1896)
...If we remain in the presence of God continually, our words, our actions, everything becomes an act of adoration... I would like prayer and acts of love to be synonymous for us. (M. Isabelle)
Our mission is to prayer before the exposed Blessed Sacrament, so that the Eucharist penetrates all of our apostolic work. (M. Isabelle, 1918)
- “Orantes are apostles...”
...in their prayer and in their external works. (M. Isabelle, 1887)
Everyone should be happy with his mission in this world. Whether we serve Him in the chapel or whether we are doing humble tasks, we should be happy with the task that God assigns to us... (M. Isabelle, 1915)

Nicole Marie Hubertine NZANZU MBAKWIRAKI, or.a., Arusha, January 2009

CHAPTER 4 – The Common Elements

Our founders had no desire to invent a new Christian spirituality. They were taken up with the freshness of the Gospel and its central teachings, convinced that society would be renewed if these could be presented in terms that women and men of their day could understand. Their very “ordinary” spirituality was in fact original by its insistence on these essentials and by the way these essential elements complement each other. Together, these elements constitute a certain faith, a particular vision of God and the world, centered on Jesus Christ and the Gospel, attentive to the great causes of the day, sons and daughters of the Church.

Marie-Eugénie de Milleret, Emmanuel d’Alzon, Marie Correnson, Etienne Pernet, Antoinette Farge, Isabelle de Clermont-Tonnerre, Vincent Picard—each one had a particular vocation that colored the way he or she lived this Assumption spirituality and that shaped the five Congregations to which they gave birth. Nonetheless, in many ways, it is clear that they were all drinking from a common source.

This shared spirit was in part the consequence of the common historical, cultural, ecclesial, and spiritual context in which our founders lived and worked: the 19th century, post-revolutionary France, Vatican Council I, the Industrial revolution... But more deeply it was nurtured by the close personal relationships and even friendships among these very different men and women. Affection and friendship bound them together; they accompanied each other humanly and spiritually; their relationships were marked by confidence, openness, docility—a willingness to allow themselves (their visions, their projects, even their sentiments) to be challenged and shaped by these relationships. These ties were an important source of support, a powerful stimulus in their founding projects and a mutual encouragement on the path of holiness.

It is possible to identify a number of distinct elements in this shared charism, but it should be noted that these elements are dimensions of a *lived* charism. For example, at various times in the history of our different Congregations (or of each of its members), one or the other of these elements might take on more or less importance. Also, in each of the Congregations, these elements might be understood in different ways. Nonetheless, it is important to identify these elements that we consider to be common and to continue reflecting together on their meaning for us. This allows us to enlarge our understanding of the Assumption charism and to live it more fully.

1) The reign of God

The Our Father expresses our common desire: that the Kingdom be established in our hearts and in our world. At the Assumption, we have a passion for the coming of God’s reign. For us the glory of God and human happiness go hand in hand. God’s Kingdom is already present in this world, but we work in view of its full coming.

2) The “total Christ”

Jesus Christ is at the heart of our charism, the “total Christ” as described by Saint Paul, including the historical figure of Jesus, the Word of God and Son of the Father, the Body of Christ which is the Church, the cosmic Christ. This Christ is expressed especially in three “mysteries” emphasized in our charism: the incarnation, the paschal mystery (which incorporates the “weakness” of God and the fragility and poverty of our human condition), and the eucharist.

3) The love of the Church

We love the Church, while fully aware of its poverty and imperfection, a dimension of Christ's incarnation, and we want to help others love the Church. One consequence of this love is the missionary dimension of our Assumption vocation and our desire to work at ecumenism, for the Church's unity.

4) The good of humankind and the transformation of society

Central to our charism, belief in the incarnation leads us to be attentive in a contemplative way to the day-to-day as the place where God reveals himself. It is in these daily realities that God's Providence is at work. Our desire, consequently, is to work for the good of humankind. We speak in terms of refashioning a people for God, of transforming society in the light of the Good News; in this regard, we are inspired by the transformation of Mary's humanity in the mystery of her Assumption .

Our founders were men and women of their day, attuned to and even involved in the political movements of their day, not to exercise human power but as agents of the Gospel. Their ambitions for humankind led them to be attentive to needs in their own country and also in the world.

5) Poverty, humility, fragility

This focus on the incarnation opens us to the poor, who reveal God in a particular way. For some of us, our concern for the poor leads us to focus our apostolic activity exclusively among the poor.

6) Contemplation and action

For every Assumption Congregation, contemplation and action are essential dimensions of our life; for us there is no opposition between the two. Contemplation is always linked to mission; our mission is nourished by a contemplative regard for the world. For some, apostolic action is the primary emphasis; for others, it is contemplation. For all, the two remained intimately united.

7) Study and education

Formal education is the central apostolic focus of some in our family, but education understood in broad terms and study are an essential dimension of the charism for all of us. Even study, for some of us, is an important apostolic and professional pursuit, but all of us consider it important that our prayer and action be informed and oriented by serious reflection and reading.

8) Community – within the Assumption family, with the laity

Inspired by Saint Augustine (from whom we have received a certain vision of God and the human person), we consider community to be the foundation of our religious life: the particular opportunity we have to live out the Gospel on a daily basis and the way in which we engage in apostolic service in the world. From the beginning, we have sought to share our charism and even our common life with lay friends.

CHAPTER 5 – Some dreams, desires, plans...

1) Cultivate friendship

Our founders supported each other humanly and spiritually by bonds of friendship and affection, par trusting and open relationships. Following their example today each one of us should be attentive to

- creating bonds of friendship;
- stimulating local encounters in different ways: informal or festive gatherings on the occasion of specific dates or events (feasts of founders, foundation anniversaries, commitment or renewal of vows...);
- reflecting in community about the extent to which we know the other Congregations and inviting someone from a particular Congregation in order to get to know them better.

2) Encourage life in different ways and assume various responsibilities depending on the circumstances:

- by making known each Congregation's activities and programs and as much as possible opening up sessions and retreats to members of the other Congregations;
- by stimulating regional gatherings, for example, to reflect on the topic of a recent international session;
- by organizing inter-Assumption weekends for young people and also for older sisters and brothers;
- by inviting members of the Congregations to participate in events like celebrations, Councils of Congregation, Chapters, etc.;
- by encouraging meetings of Provincial Councils in the different countries and regions.

3) Improve communication by existing means or by others to be created:

- by visiting Web-sites;
- by reading “newsletters”
- by communicating the results of “summit” meetings: i.e. General Councils and others ;
- by sending news more systematically to the different Congregations or better yet launching an annual inter-Assumption newsletter (to follow up on the 2004 Colloquium);
- by making known the Assumption family by a common and easily accessible publication such as a “bande dessinée”, perhaps on the subject of “the birth of a network of friendship”.

4) Pursue common efforts in the area of initial formation

- reinforce the links that already exist within the family in the area of youth ministry;
- encourage already existing common initiatives that exist in a few countries for the novitiate and post-novitiate stages of formation;
- include in the formation program an opportunity to know the Assumption family better;
- foresee inter-Assumption workshops, jointly organized;
- bring about what the 2004 Colloquium requested: a booklet for young people in formation on the history and the spirit of the Congregations, with a brief chapter on the common elements.

5) Broaden our knowledge of the charism and the spirituality of the Assumption

- continue to hold workshops like this one and involve the young religious, as well as those who are apt to have key responsibilities in the future;
- organize inter-Assumption meetings locally, where it is possible, and propose the method used here, namely confronting foundational texts;
- organize days (meetings/retreats) on the charism of the Assumption with open attendance, on a common subject or on one of our charisms, in the cities where we are located;
- organize visits “in the footsteps of our founders” in specific places on the occasion of a particular commemoration.

6) Make the Assumption visible today

- continue the effort of the General councils, of collaboration where we are in the same places ;
- have common activities: collaboration in specific projects, in certain apostolic works where each one can contribute with his/her own charism and riches. For example, Little Sisters and Religious of the Assumption could work together on an educational project;
- organize common projects:
 - hold a workshop or organize a meeting for religious with Provincials, to decide on a common project
 - an inter-Assumption social work
 - common works especially in the missions: Asia, Africa, Latin America
 - an inter-Assumption apostolic project. It could be one Congregation’s initiative, but the foundation and realization would be common.

Other proposals:

- found an inter-Assumption community
- found an inter-Assumption Spiritual center
- found a common school where each Congregation would bring its own particular contribution

Question: should we not think of involving our lay friends?

Themes for another workshop...

- on the Church: what do we mean by the phrase “love of the Church ?”; to live with the reality of the Church; to love the Church, but which Church?
- on the Kingdom: what does ART mean for each Congregation; the dimension of the Kingdom in the mission today.
- contemplative and apostolic life at the Assumption
- how does one work to transform society?
- Saint Augustine
- Assumption collaborations
- the call to holiness at the Assumption
- Assumption and prophetism
- eucharistic life
- prayer at the Assumption
- fraternal and communal life
- internationality
- Incarnation
- how to live in one’s day; the calls of the present time
- refoundation
- studies