

EXTENDING THE KINGDOM OF GOD IN OURSELVES  
AND IN THE WORLD

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EXTENDING THE KINGDOM OF GOD IN THE WORLD:  
MOTHER MARIE EUGENIE

To formulate the aim of our Congregations which to extend the Kingdom in the world, M. Marie Eugenie and Fr. d'Alzon used different expressions: "Extending the reign of God around us" or "in society" or: "Extending the Reign of Our Lord Jesus Christ in souls". It is a question of our mission, our apostolate, of the very "raison d'être" of the Congregation which is an apostolic Congregation. "An inspiration of zeal", as M. Marie Eugenie affirms, is at the origin of the foundation.

Let us examine briefly how it is that our milieu, our field of action, the landscape and the horizon of our life in the Assumption is always the Kingdom.

The Kingdom is a social reality. Our Mission is social. The vision that inspired and animated M. Marie Eugenie was neither the salvation of her soul nor sanctity – even though these are inseparable from all Christian mission. It was not simply evangelisation and the salvation of souls – of a multitude of people taken individually – nor a greater number of those baptized. The vision that enlightened and guided our Mother foundress – "which dominated my Christianity and particularly my vocation" was eminently social.

Two ideas stand out:

- the recognition of the "rights of God"
- the transformation of society by the Gospel.

Two desires making but one: the passion for the Kingdom.

God is sovereign. He should occupy the first place (in an order which admits of no second place), not only in the heart of each christian or in the life of each person but also in society. He has a right to his place as Creator, as sole and unique God. He has the right to be adored and loved by all people and by all the peoples. In the same way, Jesus Christ is our King, our Liberator and our Saviour. "The whole purpose of the world is the Reign of Christ" and our vocation is to be "adorers and apostles" of the rights of this absolute Sovereign (ch. 24.2.1878).

The transformation of society is a necessary and logical consequence of putting into practice the principles of the Gospel and the law of Christ. For M. Eugenie, the Gospel message inevitably implies "social consequences."

*‘Can you imagine the beauty of a truly Christian society’, she exclaimed in a letter to Fr. Lacordaire in the spring-time of the Congregation. “God, Lord of minds and wills, reigning everywhere although invisible; God adored; God’s very life in us preferred to all the needs that make up the natural life of man... This Reign of Christ is perhaps, more beautiful for me, more beloved of my soul... than the heavenly Jerusalem itself, where one cannot belong to God without receiving one’s rewards”. (Origines I, 2<sup>nd</sup> part Chap. XI). And to Father d’Alzon she wrote: “Finally, it is only from the Word of Jesus Christ that the earthly regeneration of mankind and of the social law should come.” (Letter, 15.3.1844). (1).*

It was in the Church that M. Marie Eugenie discovered Christ and the Kingdom. For her, Christ is inseparable from the Church and the Church is inseparable from the Kingdom. The Church’s cause and her struggle will most usually be the cause and the struggle for the Kingdom. It was in the name of the Kingdom that French Catholics in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, defended the rights and liberty of the Church because “the Reign comes from the Church” (Chapter 5.5.1878). Also, it is there that we work to extend the Reign of Jesus Christ, since “we receive the sacraments and the truth from the Church on earth” (Chapter 12.5.1878).

In the Assumption, there is no work for the Kingdom that is not of the Church, by the Church, and in a certain way, for the Church.

In her newly-founded Congregation, education would be the main means of working in the Church for the coming of the Kingdom in society. The aim of this education would be “the christianization of the intelligence”, the formation of character and commitment to service of others. Young people and women: young people constitute the society of the future women Christianize society through the family. With five little girls, the first Assumption community began a school destined to become a secondary school.

On re-reading the pages written by Marie Eugenie at the age of twenty-five, we might have the impression that she hoped “to see the Kingdom of God transported on earth” (according to Lamennais’ expression) during her life time, and that her enthusiasm tempted her to identify the Kingdom with a socio-political system (2).

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(1) During his conversations with M.M.E. at the convent of l’Impasse des Vignes, Fr. d’Alzon suggested “may your Kingdom come” as a motto for our young Congregation, and he used the same motto himself some years later, when he founded his Congregation.

(2) It is useful to remember that M.M.E. sympathized and felt drawn towards the Christian socialists, a minority group which denounced the existing order and its injustices and aimed at reforming the structures of society by basing them on Christian principles.

In point of fact, as the years slipped by, the chances of the coming of the Kingdom must have appeared to become ever more remote: the 19<sup>th</sup> century in France would be a time of struggle for the faith, for the Church and for her liberty, particularly in the field of education. In 1848 the Revolution, whose ideal seems to correspond so closely with the Gospel, was a failure. In 1870, she interpreted the war as a punishment for the country's irreligion. In 1880, she saw the persecution and suppression or exile of many religious congregations, including the Fathers of the Assumption. But Marie Eugenie's preoccupation for the good of society, what she called "the passion" dwelling in her heart from her youth, even before her conversion to Christ, did not diminish. On the contrary, her faith, her desire, her prayer and apostolic zeal grew all the stronger. She did not know how the Kingdom would come, nor when; she understood it was God's affair. But that was no reason for her not to do all in her power for its coming.

In 1882, forty years after the foundation (1), M. Marie Eugenie began Advent by giving the sisters a chapter on "Desire for the coming of the Kingdom":

*"Never before perhaps, has the reign of God been so little known as today... God has been driven from society, from its laws and institutions. But, despite all, it is certainly not the moment to be discouraged. We should continue to pray, to allow Christ to reign within us, to work for the universal and social reign of Christ. If, through education, we manage to form Christian girls who will later be wives forming Christian families, then we shall have contributed to the coming of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ in society."*

(cf. Chapter 3.12.1882).

And in September 1878, she had noted in one of her retreats:

*The Reign of Jesus Christ... the very reason why I am a religious of the Assumption, it is the object of the fourth vow I have made. I ought never to do nor say anything that does not have as its aim the extension of this Reign." (Retreat notes).*

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(1) At this time the Congregation had twenty communities in France, Spain and England. Marie Eugenie had suffered from the failure of the Congregation in South Africa and in New Caledonia.

Before her death, other houses were opened in Italy, Nicaragua, the Philippines and in El Salvador. Among the apostolates of these 20 communities these were: 15 schools, mainly boarding schools; 2 orphanages, 4 houses of Adoration and Retreats; several primary schools, (the majority for the poor, like those of Richmond, London, Sedan, Madrid and S. Sebastian), as well as other catechetical and social works.

And we, a century and a half later? In our days, thanks to the astronauts, we have actually seen a photo of our world: a small sphere, blue and green and beautiful. But our planet is also a troubled and insecure little world in the immensity of the Universe. Five billion human beings are scattered over its surface; its resources are being exhausted; war rages in more than forty areas and we possess nuclear weapons endangering the future of the human race.

God is officially excluded from many nations; in many others He is forgotten or considered unnecessary. The misery and oppression of his children make a mockery of the image and love of the Creator. This in large part, is because his other children are not concerned about them.

Nevertheless, humanity has never experienced such deep yearnings and aspirations: hope of solidarity and of mutual help, of liberation, of communion in diversity. Never before has it been so possible to respond to humanity's vital needs, to heal so many ills, to penetrate the marvelous secrets of man and his universe. Our communications system and exploits in space have awakened the consciousness that our planet is a global village where we are called to live in harmony.

More than ever before, the world needs to recognize its God, to be open to the mystery of the Incarnation, to welcome the Kingdom.

As Father d'Alzon told his brothers: "Our vocation is admirable both because of its timeliness and its magnificent aims" (1).

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(1) Spiritual Writings, p. 156. (Letter to the Noviciate 1868).

## II. EXTENDING THE REIGN OF GOD IN THE WORLD: TODAY.

During the past twenty years, we, today's sisters of the Assumption, have been seeking what it means to extend the Kingdom by the transformation of society in this last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and looking forward to the third millennium.

God said to Moses: "I have seen, I have heard..." We have tried to see what he sees, to hear as he hears the cry of his people. So many cries...

Through years of prayer, of personal and community discernment, through experimentation – you only need to retrace your personal history and that of your province to see this – we have come to the point where we have a Congregational Project. The Congregation has set out certain objectives and established guide-lines and a plan of action. (The Provinces are at different stages in the adaptation and the actual putting into practice of this plan).

The different stages and fruits of this progress are found at Congregational level in the Chapter documents, the Rule of Life, the reports of sessions: sessions for those responsible for formation, for treasurers and for those in education.

We can say to ourselves: "This is what 'Extending the Kingdom by our whole life' means for us today."

The following pages propose to summarize the experience of the Congregation and to reflect it back to you.

I want to situate our experience in the light of the history and thought of Marie Eugenie as well as in the light of the Church in the contemporary world. At the same time, you will find here a minimum of doctrinal elements which may help you to grasp the link between the Kingdom and the teaching of the Church.

I would like both to confirm the route the Congregation has taken and to invite every sister to go forward more intelligently and more boldly along the way thus indicated.

### 1. THE CHURCH AND THE KINGDOM:

Although several Fathers of the Church and theologians throughout the ages have identified the Church with the Kingdom, our founders did not do so. Nevertheless, for both Marie

Eugenie and Emmanuel d'Alzon, it was not possible to dissociate Christ, the Church and the Kingdom. This is the idea also, of Vatican II.

The Church's mission is to proclaim the Kingdom of the Christ of God and to establish it in every nation. Sacrament of Christ, she can also be considered as sacrament of the Kingdom. She helps it to take shape, for she is already the seed and the beginning of the Kingdom on earth. But the Kingdom extends on every side beyond the visible Church. It exists in all the good being realized in the world under the impulse of the Spirit. And the People of God are called to be attentive and ever open to this unceasing action of God. On the other hand, so great is the mystery of the Church herself, that our thought should not limit her reality solely to her visible and earthly dimensions. Her intimate and full life is hidden (as for all of us) with Christ in God. A pilgrim on earth, she lives from and constantly renews herself at the invisible sources where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. One day she will appear with Christ, her Spouse, in glory and then God will be all in all... In this coming of the Reign, the Church and the Kingdom will be one. Lumen Gentium Illumines this relationship between the Church and the Kingdom: "The People of God, the Church, is on pilgrimage towards her destiny, the Kingdom, inaugurated on earth by God Himself" (1).

### **Love of the Church.**

To love Christ is to love His Church. To love the Kingdom is to love the Church. One text alone suffices to illustrate how Marie Eugenie understood and loved:

*"Adveniat regnum tuum... For us, this spirit of zeal ought to manifest itself in a work of love for Our Lord, in devotedness and zeal for souls, to whose service we have been consecrated and in that filial love for the holy Church which means that all pertaining to her and touching her, all her interests and cares, will be the object of a thought, a desire or a prayer and the motive of our continual and constant concern."*  
(Chapter 14.12.1873).

As with all love, our love for the Church requires that we love her as she is in her total reality. There is not other Church than the one in which we live today. The Church of Jesus is the Church of Peter and Paul, of John Paul II, of the confessors and martyrs, of contemplatives of all the ages, of sinners and ordinary people like ourselves. Loving the Church means that we recognize her profound Goodness, her intimate Truth, her striking Beauty and that we accept also the stains and wrinkles on her pilgrim face. As long as the

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(1) *Lumen Gentium* does not pretend to give a theology of the Kingdom but often makes reference to it. It is interesting to collate and compare the different texts ( see L.G. – Chapters 5, 6, 7).

Church is on her journey here below, and we with her, she will experience sin and division among her members. Like all human institutions, the Church will be slow to move and slow to change, always in need of conversion. We love her as she is.

Marie Eugenie had to face many difficulties, disillusionments and sufferings as regards the Church. When she was twenty-five she wrote something very consoling for us: "I dreamed I would find apostles. I found only men. Therein lies the source of the bitterness which sometimes torments me" (Letter to Fr. Lacordaire, 1841). Up to twenty-five one can feel that way!

Have you ever noticed that since 1888 there is a constant refrain the formulation of the aim of the Congregation: (1)

- "To extend the Reign of Christ..."
- "To make Jesus Christ and his Church known and loved..."

Not just Jesus Christ but Jesus Christ and his Church. Our vocation in the Church, our maternal role as well as that of daughter, should make us particularly sensitive to all that affects the Church and her life, and responsible for the body of Christ which is the Church.

Our first concern for the Kingdom is then, and always will be, a concern for the Church of Jesus Christ. She not only nourishes our life – by Truth and the sacraments – but also our mission. The Cause of the Church as well as the causes of the Church will be the causes of the Assumption.

Today for us, these causes are principally:

- the renewal and the formation of local Church communities,
- inculturation (which is closely associated to the above)
- the poor

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(1) From the Constitutions of 1888



## **The Causes of the Church**

### **- The local church communities**

In all thirty countries where the Assumption is found, we share in the formation, growth and renewal of the local Church in different types of communities.

There are:

- communities which spring up one after the other in the “young” churches
- basic Christian communities
- the long-established and more traditional communities.

Their life is the life of the Church and their future is her future.

At the time of the Second Vatican Council, the Church faced up to the needs and demands of the modern world; she reconsidered her life and mission in the world. Rediscovering and giving greater importance to certain aspects of ecclesiology, the documents of the Council have opened new perspectives for the third millennium. They insist on communion and mission as the essential elements of the Church and they emphasize such concepts as People of God, the common priesthood of the baptized and the active participation of the laity in the life and mission of the Church. These ideas, considered together, point towards a new Church model, one which has not yet taken shape. It must be sought now, not in documents or conferences, but in lived experience, in the life shared by the faithful – laity, religious, priests – in mutual trust.

This model will surely be a synthesis of the old and the new; unity will be established on equality in the faith and on the baptism common to all members; the various charisms and ministries will have room to develop and the ordained ministers will be true shepherds and servants of communion. A new type of structure will emerge, with greater participation, which will allow for a more extensive plurality within the essential unity.

The Church, sign and sacrament of our union with God and of communion among men, should make this communion manifest in our world: a communion between men and women, rich and poor, people of every race and nation. In today’s society this sign of communion will not be given unless there is within the Christian community: shared responsibility, dialogue, open communication and a decision-making process which takes into account competences and roles. Women should be accorded their place of true equality with men, since it is together that they are “man made in the image and likeness of God”. The Gospel message and the Church will not be credible without this lived-out communion. We have a long way to go. This means the conversion, creativity and courage of the entire Church.

The members of the Christian community so described, expect, from us religious, that we be sisters with them as disciples of Christ and happy to be consecrated to Christ in the Church. Our presence as women living in community, should, in a discreet way, favour understanding, acceptance of differences and those reconciliations which will always be necessary. The people ask also from us, Sisters of the Assumption, to accompany them in their search for truth and in their discernments, and to help them in their spiritual and intellectual formation.

The building up of the Christian community is an urgent task if the Church is to answer the desires and needs of humanity according to God's plan.

#### **- Inculturation**

Inculturation is the implanting or Incarnation of the Gospel and Christian life in a given culture. This term, very familiar to us nowadays, was invented about thirty years ago to express a new awareness in the Church of her mission of evangelization. On the one hand, she realizes that there is no real evangelization if the person is not reached from within his culture. On the other hand, she recognizes the dignity of each culture and a diversity of cultures as willed by God. Each culture having its own riches and resources, its values and way of life, is called to express the Gospel in a special way (1).

Since the time of St. Paul, this is perhaps the first time that the Roman Church has broken away from "her" culture- that of the Mediterranean cradle – and has recognized the need to meet the people of the world on their own ground, within their own particular culture. Formerly, missionaries tended to measure their success by the geographical extension of the Church, the number of baptized persons and the practice of the sacraments. Today they aim rather to form communities of disciples who follow Jesus Christ through personal conviction.

The Gospel respects all cultures but also challenges them. Evangelization purifies and promotes the different cultures, freeing their energies and revealing the truth of the values

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(1) Culture is such a vast reality that it can be defined in many ways, none very satisfactory. I think everyone has an idea of what it is but to make your reading easier, I offer a "mini-definition": "Culture is that combination of values, customs, laws and rules of institutions which express and mediatise the ethos and the aspirations of a given society."

they practice. It “stretches” these cultures to the humanizing dimensions of the Incarnate Word. At the same time, judging cultures in the light of the Cross – it overturns their criteria of judgment, their principal values, their centers of interest, the thought and inspiration, the models of life of people, which are in contrast with the Word of God and the plan of Salvation (E.N. 20). Evangelization means going beyond the existing culture. It brings forth a new creation.

In the evangelization of cultures of which I speak, a “wonderful exchange” takes place: the Gospel discloses the “seeds of the Word” hidden in the culture and develops them, while the culture manifests new aspects of the Gospel and expresses them in a unique way. We can say, then, that inculturation leads to the recapitulation of all things in Christ.

Our universal vocation and our mission of education make the unculturation of faith and Christian life a task particularly adapted to our charism. In fact, evangelization of the culture is the modern expression of what M. Marie Eugenie sought through the Christianization of the intelligence, character formation and the transformation of society. What we understand by inculturation covers what we understand by holistic education and the regeneration or transformation of society by Gospel values.

Normally, when we think of inculturation, we think of the work of theologians or the adaptation of liturgical rites. Intellectual research is indeed not barred to us – quite the contrary. However, the true field of inculturation is the local Christian community.

Our first contribution should be the will and resolve to undertake the delicate and difficult task of inculturation. Next we should have immense confidence, for without it nothing can be accomplished. Confidence in the efficacious power of Jesus and of his Word in the community, confidence in the capacity of the people themselves to receive the word and translate it into their own culture.

Our pedagogy needs to be improved. It should be a pedagogy based on respect and dialogue, on reflection and encouragement. We need to learn the history, the myths and symbols of the people, to touch their creative imagination and their affective powers as well as their rational intelligence. Herein lie the powerful forces of a culture. People are evangelized through intellectual reasoning but they are touched and transformed equally, if not more, by the appeal to imagination and memory: by history and myth, by poetry and symbol, by the loves, hates, fears of their hearts. The whole person should be considered and all the aspects of the culture. We should be alert to detect and appeal to the noblest and most generous intuitions and aspirations in the people, since these have an eternal reach.

Inculturation means a permanent process of discernment within the Christian community. It also requires confrontation with the discovery made by other communities of the same culture as well as with the experience of the universal Church. Our own religious communities – very often international – can become privileged places of discernment. There we can help one another to recognize and remove obstacles within ourselves. There we can learn the humility and patience necessary to allow people to follow their own rhythm and that of the Lord.

### **Culture and Faith**

Inculturation is not a task reserved to missionaries and the young Churches for evangelization is an on-going process. The people of God are constantly faced with new situations because of their commitment to history, and because of their faith in the Incarnation and in the Kingdom. Christians have to strive constantly to understand existence in the light of the Word of God, to integrate their life in Christ and to proclaim the Good News to their contemporaries.

Culture, whose heart is religion, should present a coherent world view by which men can understand themselves, recognize their proper role and commit themselves. The accelerated socio-cultural changes of our times have so powerfully shaken Western societies that the peoples have lost at one and the same time, both a clear world vision and a Christian understanding of their existence. The divorce between faith and culture is so deep today that many speak of the need of a new evangelization in Europe.

The challenge that this shattering of the culture can present to the faith and its expression, is exactly what Marie Eugenie faced 150 years ago. A daughter of her times, she was thrilled by the discoveries and possibilities, the preoccupations and questions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Aflame with love of that Truth she had found in Christ and in the Gospel, she sought to harmonize her reason and her faith, her culture and the expression of her faith. Through love of Christ and her fellow human beings, she undertook education in the faith and according to the faith, in terms which were comprehensible and credible to the young people of her times.

M. Marie Eugenie hoped that by studying and teaching not only religion but also secular subjects, she would contribute to the realization of a new unity and to the “recapitulation of all things in Christ” (Ep. 1, 10). We can go so far as to say that the type of education envisioned by Marie Eugenie, aimed at evangelizing the culture.

Nowadays, we have to deal with the second industrial revolution, the technological revolution. Technology has led to profound changes. It is not a question of just adding something more; life has become different. Complex technological systems structure our life and that of our nations. They have such a powerful effect on our personal and social life that we sometimes have the impression of being caught up in the workings of an implacable and oppressive machine.

Yet the existing technologies with their systems and styles are the result of human decisions. They are the outcome of a complex set of values and criteria, motivations and prejudices of both those who create and those who use them. Certain values are recognized, others are left aside, by choice. The economy, politics and technology are the product of values knowingly developed rather than the inverse. They do not control culture. Our chosen values do.

God has gifted his creature with marvelous creative power. It is also a dangerous one (1). We must assume responsibility for the work of our hands and our brains. If we are at present building a Tower of Babel which will end by confounding us, it is our fault, not that of technology: love of money and facility, idolatrous submission to technology and the cult of the individual. Some foresee the consequences of our folly. I have in mind the different movements: for nuclear disarmament, for preservation of natural resources, against abortion. But these leave the roots of evil intact.

What can be done? Where should we start? The evangelization of our culture begins with a simple prophetic statement of hope, capable of overcoming the feeling of powerlessness and discouragement, the moral insensitivity and the deadly inertia which have invaded our present-day society: God is faithful to his Covenant and his promises – the future can be different. Evangelization begins in the daily life of ordinary people. Once again, I stress the importance of the Christian community. All I have written above on inculturation and the local community could be said equally well here.

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(1) I do not want to give the impression that I look down on technology, for I admire it. The technological system which exceed our comprehension - and even that of experts is the work of the human mind and are a gift of God. We need to learn to contemplate his greatness and goodness in the marvels of technology.

Gathered together to listen to the Word and to reflect on their experience, the disciples of Christ are able to discern the judgment and desires of God in their lives and in society; they can discern the sources of life and also the sources of death, “the sicknesses” that need healing. The members of a local Church community will gradually form a different view of reality from that offered by the dominant culture of the market and the media. By studying their present in the light of the past, they will discover stable points of identity and take the necessary means to integrate them. By relying on what is authentically human and humanizing, the community will establish a style of life which harmonizes with its culture, but has broken with its sin. The Church will be the one who is attentive to the quality of human relationships and assures their permanence. She will be the guardian of those values abandoned by cultural fashion – values like contemplation, silence and disinterestedness.

There is no shame in being a “remnant” if by its existence such a community affirms the possibility of a different future. It can be prophetic, proclaiming good news and denouncing the forces of evil; it can offer meaning and hope for all. Such a community would not be a refuge but a community fully aware of having a mission in society.

Of course, some may have to mourn the loss of the old world in order to open up to the new, but for prophets, lamentation and praise are not incompatible.

These communities will demand of us a surplus of humanity: courage in the struggle, patience in complexity, perseverance in spiritual and intellectual effort. This will be possible only for those who receive their times as a gift from God and who know how to rejoice in the life which is budding forth everywhere.

### **- The Poor**

It is clear that the cause of the poor is one of the chief challenges for the Church today. The poor we will always have with us; and one of the signs of the Kingdom is that the Gospel be proclaimed to them (RL 78). This proclamation begun by Jesus Christ in his ministry, is necessarily accompanied and followed by the material care of those in need. Is not Jesus always our model: the eminently Poor One, at the service of the poor?

Solicitude for the poor and the weak has always been at the heart of the Church’s mission. She cannot seek happiness for people as citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven without also seeking their happiness in the earthly city. The Church wants to meet their needs, provide for their education and to free them from all that might hinder their development as persons.

Throughout the ages, the Church has always recognized this duty of love and striven to carry it out. Nowadays, however, the problem has assumed such a scale and urgency that it has become of prime importance. A huge section of humanity, hundreds of millions of innocent people, suffer unjustly. Yet the world has the means – especially in the so-called “Christian” countries – to alleviate this misery. If only there were the will. After 2000 years of Christianity, we are still faced with a flagrant contradiction between the human dignity preached by the Gospel and the actual structures of society. No Christian can refuse to help and keep a clear conscience. It is as simple as that. The Kingdom is God’s concern but the Father entrusted this earth and our brothers and sisters to the Church, and they are our responsibility. It behooves us then, through faith, if not through our common humanity to respond to the immense sum of suffering endured by our fellowmen. Suffering that we see daily on television and in the newspapers even if we do not meet it directly in the street.

Nor can Christians partake of the Eucharistic bread if they do not share also the daily bread asked for and received each day from the Father. The Church would be unfaithful to her Lord and her mission if she did not have the determined desire to help the poor. The official pronouncements of the Church and the appeals made so frequently by the Holy Father only serve to accentuate the urgency of the situation and the gulf between the will of Christ and the response of Christians. What more pressing appeal to education can be voiced?

I believe that all the sisters of the Congregation are fully aware of this problem and the Provinces with few exceptions, have already struck a path in this direction. I am not wholly convinced, however, that all the sisters understand – so that it is operational in their lives – to what extent the problem of poverty and the poor corresponds to the charism of the Assumption and our mission of education.

For M. Marie Eugenie, an important way of changing society, was to improve the lot of the poor; she dreamed of a social state where no one is oppressed by his fellowmen. The first Assumption communities took on the education of the children of poor and under-privileged families as well as that of the more influential and affluent.

One of M. Marie Eugenie’s innovations – both prophetic and unacceptable in her times – was to suggest that “contemplative” sisters should have direct contact with the harsh reality of the daily life of the poor; this not as a simple dictate of charity, but as a “spiritual” help to the religious themselves, and for their work of education, the education of girls (1).

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(1) “The Religious of the Assumption should visit the poor, and serve them as the most precious members of Jesus Christ, so that at their feet, they may be nourished with pious sentiments of deep humility and evangelical simplicity. They should also take their young pupils with them to show them misery at first hand and to teach them to alleviate it”. (Constitutions of 1843 – see the whole of the First Chapter on the Aim of the Order

Certainly, should M. Marie Eugenie have made an analysis of society with modern methods, she would have been led to conclude that the poor themselves should be protagonists in the transformation of their society and not just the rich and powerful. Father d'Alzon already foresaw this in his day... and so did Karl Marx!

During the last twenty five years, our Congregation has seen a distinct shift towards the poorer populations. A large proportion of sisters are working among them. It remains true also, that by our tradition, our project and our formation, we can still hope to influence those with authority and power. We educate those who will control the media, who will make decisions in the political and economic fields and who will establish the criteria and values of tomorrow's culture.

In fact, the Congregation does not exist for a particular class or category of persons. It was founded for the Kingdom that the Father desires for all men. The Congregation exists and works everywhere for truth and liberty, for greater fraternity, peace and justice in society. So that the world will become a place of ever greater glory for God and of happiness for humankind.

The Congregation has answered the appeal of the Church in favour of the poor and very generously. Very good. But it is not enough. The option for the poor has been taken on by all our communities, in all our works, in catechetics, in schools and college programmes (this is important especially in the more privileged milieux), in our prayer centers. We must dare to create projects, invent new teaching methods, even find a spirituality. The whole of our educational project must assume and express this option of the Church for the poor and for justice (R.L. 24, 78. 79). For all of us, this implies a certain first-hand knowledge, not just of the conditions of the life of the poor, but of the poor as persons, as our brothers and sisters. Is it too much to ask that we understand the situation of poverty from the point of view of those who endure it?

After all I have written above, it should be clear that the option for the poor is not just one among others, but that it is an obligation. We cannot pretend to work for the Kingdom and the transformation of Society without taking into account the distress of such a large proportion of humanity.

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It is clear that the three causes of the Church that I stress: the local Church Community, Inculturation (Culture and Faith), the Poor are in fact closely inter-woven. All three should be present in our projects although one or the other will be predominant.

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### **Two related subjects:**

#### **- Young people.**

According to our Rule of Life, young people are a “priority” for us (R.L. 80). This means that the young people should come before others. I do not think that in all the Provinces this idea corresponds with the reality. This does not mean to say that we should give all our attention to young people and abandon the others, but that young people should be the object of particular concern. This, because they will form the society of tomorrow, and because we have a charism for young people. We can dream with them of a better world and work for this; we hope to entrust the world and the future of humanity to their hands.

Young people already belong to the new culture. They have known no other, neither their parents’ culture, nor ours. As citizens of the global electronic village, they have a way of feeling and thinking, of acting and communicating. – of being – which is quite different from our own. Their world is foreign to many of us, and to enter their territory it is good not only to recognize that we are strangers there, but to let ourselves be guided by them. they are ready to help us. We should not be stopped by laziness nor by fear - they are not hostile. They are different but they do not expect us to be like them. They band together in self-defense, in face of a world they have not fashioned and do not understand. They cannot find the way by themselves and they know it; they are looking for adult friends and mentors who are becoming more and more scarce.

It is not sufficient that we look at television from time to time, listen to some rock music or teach catechetics, to conclude that we either do or do not know young people. Nor should we imagine that we “have” young people because we have classes, groups or schools. Often the opposite is true. They are there, but we scarcely understand them and we do not know how to treat them as the young adults they are.

Besides the challenge of communicating with youth, there is also the challenge of integrating the young people as fully fledged members into the Christian community. They risk becoming marginalized in the churches because they are so numerous (as in the "Third World.") or because they are so few (as in "Ageing Europe"). But this integration demands of our communities a change of mentality and structure as well as a return to the youthfulness of the Spirit. For all too many young people the Church is a body of "church-goers", a transmitter of doctrines and laws; while what they need is a place of communication, of stable relationships, of apprenticeship with their elders in love and fidelity to Christ. They need opportunities where they can commit themselves.

Even if young people are frightening to many adults, we must try to go out towards them. As in the case of their parents, all too often, we are too occupied with our own affairs.

I must stop. My aim is not to treat all possible questions concerning young people, but to remind us that they exist, that we should try to be in touch with them and love them. They are the society of tomorrow, the society towards which we look in hope. The future of our culture, of our Church as well of our Congregation, will depend largely on our knowledge of and our identification with the life-giving forces of our time and the aspirations in the hearts of our young people.

### **The School and Schools.**

Throughout the Congregation, we still maintain a good number of schools. Some are of high quality and others less good. Some evangelize in depth and in others the seeds of the Word seem to fall on rocky and arid soil. Many sisters devote themselves to education in schools with generosity and intelligence. In spite of the limits of the educational institution and the competition from other means of education, the school remains particularly well adapted to the evangelization of the culture. It offers an exceptional number of conditions which favour that integral formation aimed at by the educational project of the Assumption.

The school can also be a powerful element in social transformation since it has an impact not only on individuals, but also on the society. I am thinking here of one or other of our schools which is a centre of education for an entire village, of one or other small town where all who have received secondary education are ex-students of the Assumption!

The school system has been vigorously shaken by the successive waves of change which have swept over society and shattered the culture. Many schools have found difficulty in adjusting and adapting to it all. The school systems have been subject also to many political, economic and ideological pressures.

Whatever may be the causes of difficulties, it seem to me, that in each Province we need to subject our schools to an evaluation which is as lucid and realistic as it is evangelical. We should examine their type of education, the possibilities of improvement (particularly with reference to the necessary investment of sisters), the future, in relation to the society they will be required to serve, and to the Province which is responsible. There are some schools which should not be maintained, and others which should fulfill their mission more competently.

The program and curriculum of our schools should take into account very seriously all that I have written about the Kingdom in terms of transformation of society and the evangelization of the culture, the harmony to be found between the sciences and faith, of the possibilities for forming a Christian community. It is not enough to reproduce the thoughts and methods used by M. Marie Eugenie one hundred and fifty years ago. As she did, we need to create a pedagogy and programs, which are adapted to modern needs, to minds and hearts at the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to their intellectual and spiritual quest. Formation will be incomplete if the program does not include possibilities for young people to commit themselves and to render service. A process of evaluation should be established and carried out with teachers and parents and with the pupils themselves, according to their age.

Throughout the Congregation, the institutions are too numerous and varied, the countries where we have houses too numerous and varied also, for me to give general directives. However, there are certain conditions without which it will be difficult for a school to fulfill its role in the Christian community:

- that the faculty as a whole, be fully committed to the educational project and motivated by love for young people;
- that one can count on a certain receptivity on the part of the young people themselves: they should be committed to their own education according to their age and capabilities;
- that the school should not be too cut off from the milieu nor the society from which the students come;  
It is desirable that the school be a part of the local community and that there be links with the other local institutions.
- that one can count on a minimum of collaboration from the families of the students.

It is certain that everything cannot be changed overnight. But we can hope that those responsible will have enough lucidity to recognize the needs, and plan for change. We must have the courage to do all that we can with the means available and have the initiative to find the means which are lacking!

## 2. THE KINGDOM AND REVOLUTION:

At the present time, the Assumption is in three countries which have lived through a revolution and a change of government. In nearly every other country we would be glad to see changes in the systems and structures of the socio-political and economic life. These questions are familiar to all of us and subjects of our everyday conversations.

M. Marie Eugenie lived through two revolutions in her country and a period of revolution in Europe. She was only thirteen when the revolution of 1830 brought Louis-Philippe to power. It became clear that the movement towards democracy was irreversible, and already in her family, republican ideas were forming her opinions.

As a young convert, as a young religious, (she was about thirty), as foundress, Marie Eugenie saw great hope for her people for the Church and the Kingdom in the revolution of 1848. On this occasion, contrary to their position in 1830, the clergy were on the side of the common people. Cardinal Affre, Archbishop of Paris, was killed at the barricades in an attempt at mediation.

The new Republic, in Marie Eugenie's opinion, was close – in its ideal – to the Gospel. Both she and Fr. d'Alzon not only approved of the revolution, but they supported it enthusiastically. Fr. d'Alzon created a newspaper for the South of France, and just missed running as candidate for a seat in the new Government. In Paris, Marie Eugenie had numerous contacts with men in the government, including her old friend Buchez whose moral qualities she admired, and by whose ideas she was willingly influenced.

Reading her correspondence and following the events with Marie Eugenie, we can see how well she maintained objectivity and a critical distance, in spite of her passion for politics. We see her trying to get as much information as possible, estimating the merits and failings of persons and their actions, pointing out the injustices or good in whatever party they were to be found. Her discernment is clear and judicious when she has to counsel or advise.

However, is Marie Eugenie had ever imagined an “evangelical” government, during the early days of the Republic she soon lost her illusions regarding the true objectives and possibilities of politics.

In fact, the aims of those who seek power and of those who seek only the Kingdom and its justice, are difficult to reconcile on the terrain. The social and political order seeks the welfare of individuals and groups. This is a real and necessary service but it will always stop short at the earthly and temporal. The spiritual hunger which comes from God and which he alone can satisfy, is not taken into account; it belongs to another order, that of the Kingdom. The cause of the Kingdom, then, can never be identified with any socio-political project, nor with a party or system. In the same way, we religious, who desire above all and through all to be witnesses and laborers for the Kingdom of God and his justice, can never allow ourselves to be limited to a political cause. The Kingdom can be present in political liberations, and these liberations can be a sign of the Kingdom. But they are very incomplete in comparison with the liberation won for us by Christ.

Political programs and projects will be more or less in accord with Christian principles and with those human values we wish to promote. Because of the Kingdom, we should examine and evaluate them. We may approve and support them, but we are also obliged to combat the error, lies and evil, we may discover. In so far as we are committed by our vocation to seek the good of humanity, we will inevitably be led into the political sphere. And we will have to oppose governments, laws and structures which do not respect the dignity of the human person, which oppress our brothers and sisters and which hinder their development.

When our sympathies lie with a particular party, or when we belong to a group or organization, we should safeguard the necessary liberty to oppose all that goes against the fundamental rights of man, which are also the inviolable rights of the Creator.

Our sole unconditional option being for Christ – his love and his Kingdom – we shall also be obliged to refuse personally all that runs counter to our particular vocation. Called to be prophetic witnesses of the Kingdom, we should always prefer the means Christ employed and reject the means of secular power and force. The Cross of Christ reminds us of the share of pardon and reconciliation in the justice of the Kingdom. Our witness to the absolute love of Christ for all men and for the Kingdom “not of this world” is but one way of service in the socio-political sphere, but it is an essential and irreplaceable service. No other commitment should be allowed to compromise or obscure it.

What is more, since our role as educators is to enlighten minds and form people for action, it should be evident that this role is already a serious political commitment. In the long run, education is more liberating, more efficacious in putting man on his feet, than any specifically political action. As educators, we can also suggest positions that are politically impractical and unacceptable. It is necessary to put before people the ideal towards which we all strive.

This is not the place to examine the concrete political situations we may have to face. In any case, there are no recipes, nor are there any ways of avoiding difficult and sometimes costly discernments. We should not be naïve. The person who cares about justice and right, knows how readily politics can arouse passions. We must be aware that in political struggles, simple, good intentions and innocence can lend strength to an ideology or to violence. Somebody should uphold the ideal.

### 3. THE COMMUNITY AND THE KINGDOM

I deal lastly with the community; but it is so important that it could have come first. We are consecrated to “extending the Reign of God by our whole life” and our life as Religious of the Assumption, our vocation and our mission, is as community. All I have written in this letter so far, is addressed to a community, and all it contains should be lived out in community. It is our “way” of life.

#### **- Women religious: a new mode of presence.**

The religious community, by the simple fact of its existence, proclaims the Kingdom. In the midst of the people to whom it is sent, the community recalls, by its life style structured entirely in view of loving God and neighbor, the mystery of communion and holiness which God desires for the whole of humanity – the Kingdom. The community is a powerful word constantly speaking of that something more, of the eternal, which echoes the cry for infinity and communion dwelling in every heart. For many people too, the presence of a religious community is a reassuring sign of the presence of God and of his goodness, a sign of the hidden power of the Kingdom in our midst. Women consecrated to God, living celibately as sisters, will have an impact on society even if the meaning of their life is not fully explained.

The **apostolic** religious life, a list completely committed to God in the services of others, is a still more visible witness in the world today. It is a witness that transcends all cultural differences.

Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom and gave the signs of its coming: healing, consolation, liberation, the Gospel preached to the poor. Apostolic religious Congregations have been founded precisely to extend that “year of grace”. Entire communities dedicate themselves to it; they work humbly in traditional spheres with the sick and the poor, the uninstructed and the marginalized. In addition, they are found in new situations, defending those who are landless, condemning the arms race, seeking justice for fishermen, working with young drop-outs, living with their people in dangerous situations. With no family responsibilities and supported by a community, religious are free to move, to change their employment, to accept a badly paid post, to run the risks of innovation and even physical danger for the Kingdom and its justice. When these actions are clearly embraced as the cause of God for his people, then the witness becomes patent.

During the recent decades (and since Charles de Foucauld) a significant change in the Church is the new style of presence of religious life in the world. Instead of being apart and in a sacred sphere, religious communities have moved into the centre of cities and of human life. Their style of life resembles the “normal” life of ordinary people. A positive form of secularization has abolished the rules and structures which, while providing security, comfort, privileges, also hindered a real knowledge of life and even the development of one’s humanity.

This trend has placed communities in direct contact with the harsh reality of all kinds of physical, moral and material miseries: the breakdown of relationships, insoluble family problems, unemployment, alcoholism... Communities become close to the people they become real sisters. This is especially the experience of many communities living among the poor. The sight of suffering endured with patience has been the occasion of conversion for the sisters – sometimes even of scandal. How many of them have discovered with astonishment the Beatitude of poverty.

This desire to be close and to share the life of people has brought about even deeper changes of mentality and of attitudes, ways of being and doing. In the present context relationships are of prime importance. Good relationships mean more than efficiency and know-how, and bad relationships can ruin everything. The apostle is a person who knows how to relate. We religious are not those who know better or more, or who have remedies and answers for everything. On the contrary, we have never felt so powerless. Our service, our presence is being with and accompanying the people in their anguish and difficulties, in their doubts and quest. Also in their joys...

It is a fact that religious have found it hard to recognize their place in Vatican II ecclesiology and in their relationship with the clergy. Like all women they have to bear the judgment of inferiority which has been their lot down through the ages. But it is also true, that the feminine religious life, in spite of all, has safe-guarded that dignity and equality of women which was recognized and taught by Christ and the early Church. Throughout its history and still today, the religious community gives a woman exceptional opportunities to be fully herself, to develop and use her talents and to be recognized as a person.

Feminine religious communities are a sign of hope at this historical moment when more than ever before, the world is becoming conscious of the discredited and unjust situation of women.

#### **- An apostolic contemplative community**

In almost every chapter, our new Rule of Life shows us how our religious life in the Assumption is prophetic of the Kingdom. But it does not suffice that it should be written in the Rule for it to be so in fact. Let us be authentic. Let our Rule of Life be inscribed in the daily life of our communities. Unless this is so, it will be to our shame. The scribes and Pharisees are of all times.

Apostolic communities for the Kingdom, ours are also contemplative. The recognition of the absolute Sovereignty of God and of his rights, is lived first of all in the total character of our commitment. The complete and irrevocable gift of ourselves to God in our consecration to Christ and to the Kingdom is the source of and moulds all the apostolic activity of the community. We understand our vocation above all as a personal transformation in Christ and as a mission which is essentially participation in his work of Redemption. A contemplative life style maintains this lively awareness, supports our efforts and leads us back ceaselessly to the Source.



Transformation is a community affair. During the Plenary General Council 1984 in Mexico, we realized that we ourselves have to live in our own communities what we want to proclaim. We can apply to the community all that I have written on our mission and on extending the Reign in the world. Each time I wrote this phrase, I thought; "It is so grandiose... isn't there a less pretentious expression?" Yes, we want to see society transformed by Christ: this will be accomplished at the end of time. For today, is it not more realistic to say: We want society to become a little more evangelical, a little less egotistical, less violent, less unjust, less materialistic? God works with infinite patience; he loves to work with what is poor, weak, humble. Is that not our religious community?

Are our communities not called to a continual transformation? It is a gift of God for the good of others, and there is something of a miracle about it. But the sign can be given in spite of and through our weaknesses and our fragility. It requires the faith and desire of all – neither more nor less.

We have never finished building the community, never finished becoming less self-centered, more welcoming of the other- in her differences – never finished seeking reconciliation and giving peace to one another. As we discover the violence, the secret egoisms, the desire for power, and the hardness in our own hearts, we begin to measure how difficult it is for a whole society to be open to the justice of the Kingdom. We learn to marvel at the least sign of progress. Let us accept this combat with courage and perseverance, certain that we are one with a multitude of others whose love prevents the forces of destruction from being unleashed on humanity.

The foundation of our small communities, at once contemplative and apostolic, has changed the face of the Congregation. In the city, in the village, in the neighborhood, our house is like all the others – but not exactly, since it is a little more spacious, to facilitate the contemplative life (a life lived within) and to provide hospitality. Everyone feels at home there – the sisters themselves, their neighbors and friends. It is everyone's house, for it is the house of God. Austerely but carefully furnished, the house can be beautiful in its simplicity and evoke the transcendence of God. The warm-hearted welcome of the sisters for everyone without exception brings the love of God – as Father and Mother! The house is not left empty – it is "occupied". The Lord, of course, is always waiting in the chapel and someone may knock at the door.

Our house is a monastery, yet it is not a monastery. An atmosphere of silence and serenity reigns there, drawing minds and hearts to the invisible Master. Yet the house resounds with the noise of activity from time to time. The peace and silence can be suddenly shattered by laughter and spontaneous gaiety. At moments, so many people pass in and out that it is like a railway station. And some days, meetings follow one another like the rhythm of the Office, and house and garden may be overflowing with children. Nevertheless, we are accustomed to praying, studying, and being recollected, in spite of the background disturbances. A deeper awareness holds our attention.

Without sacrificing our privacy and the necessary moments of life together in community, we like to welcome others, sharing with them the joy of our common life in Christ. We lose nothing of the intensity of our community life by being open and hospitable; on the contrary, contact with others has its advantages. Friends and co-workers soon learn to love and respect the demands and limits of such a life of simplicity and availability. They do not need to know of the asceticism and interiority this means for us.

Every convent attracts its collection of marginal and poor people. Their presence is like a brass name-plate at the door indicating: "Kingdom". If they are missing we should ask ourselves why.

Above all, our neighbors and friends expect a presence of prayer, even if they do not actually participate in it. The regular times of Office and the hours of Adoration mean that the chapel is enveloped in an atmosphere of prayer like the scent of incense, even should it be empty for a time. Our liturgy is not "sumptuous" and the music is not necessarily an aesthetic experience (it is servant of the Word). But, without lessening the content and beauty of the Office, we take care that it should be within the reach of all. Without too much difficulty guests can "enter in" and be nourished by it. Here again, the cost for the community is not on display.

### **-Study**

The importance given to religious and profane studies was yet another of the "innovations" which characterized M. Marie Eugenie's new foundation. Studies – a "capital point" for us – had a chapter to themselves in the first Constitutions. They should link us with both the great Tradition of the Church and the thought and preoccupations of our contemporaries.

For us study is part of a whole – silence, solitude, interiority, prayer, - it is an aspect of our own search for God in the contemplative life. At the same time it is a necessary aspect of our mission for it should nourish and support our work of education. I stated above that the People of God are constantly confronted with new situations and new questions and that our role is to teach, to accompany and to discern. This means that we must make the constant effort to keep up-to-date.

It is not a question of knowing a great deal of facts, of having knowledge in lofty fields, still less is it a question of diplomas. We seek the Truth: to know God, his plan his Wisdom. We form ourselves for the mission, not according to our personal tastes, but according to the needs of the Kingdom and the service of our neighbor.

Our attention is fixed on the world and the life around us, on Christ and the Scriptures. We try to discover their meaning and their hidden unity – how the whole of creation speaks of the glory of God and can serve Love. We journey alongside our fellowmen and help them to make their own discoveries so that in their turn they may live in light.

The duty of study demands asceticism and discipline, it is also a pleasure and a consolation. The degree of contentment or difficulty we meet with varies according to our temperament and tastes, the time of day, or our stage in life. In any case, our true satisfaction will always be, quite simply, in accomplishing the Father's Will and in helping others.

Both communities and provinces have taken this duty very seriously during the past years. Several Provinces have even worked out five-year plans for formation. Plans have been drawn up carefully, keeping in mind the needs of the provincial project. The sisters know how to take full advantage of available experts and of moments when sisters can gather. Rarely do the holidays pass without there being at least one important session for the sisters of a Province. It is good to learn together.

The local community can play a decisive role, one of prime importance, in on-going formation. First of all, our life together, our meetings and conversations are nourished daily, not only by the richness of our differences but also by our varied apostolic experiences. Zeal for the Kingdom and the concerns of the Father prevent us from talking about food or the price of shoes, from gossiping about our neighbors or petty affairs. Our conversations are a source of continual formation because of the questions raised by our contacts with different people, world news and the sharing of readings or conferences.

There are sessions together, community meetings, discernments, the drawing up of the community project, Provincial or other questionnaires and the circulars of the Congregation. Through these studies in community the passion “for faith, love and the realization of the law of Christ” is enkindled. (Letter No. 1627, 5.8.1844). It is there we can learn true intelligence which is the art of creating relationships: relating things to each other, things and people, current events and history, and linking everything to God. We discern what is or is not humanizing and Christian in our environment. All that we need is to cultivate a sincere desire to learn to make some efforts, to accustom ourselves to reflecting, and to being interested in others and in the world.

A serious-minded community calculates the time at its disposal and realizes the importance of using it well. It knows how to set limits, to make choices, to plan. This should be part of every community project.

On the personal level, each one is responsible for self-formation. M. Marie Eugenie stressed the need to learn something new each day and to renew oneself constantly. Father d’Alzon was prepared to refuse absolution to the sister who did not study! But not just anything. Objectives should be set out: to read certain books during the year or so many books on a particular subject, to learn something useful for the community (cooking for example), to improve in some subject, to fill in some lack.

One’s personal on-going formation is a matter of professional conscience and a matter to be seen with the superior.

### **-Unity of life**

Our particular way of living for Jesus and the Kingdom offers us a life humanly rich and beautiful; it is a grace of the Incarnation and of the vocation to restore all things in Christ. Our charism in the liturgy, studies, and relationships gives a certain depth and even brilliance to our life. I am not praising it. I am stating a fact. I do not think this style of life is easy. (Nor do I say it is more difficult than others.) It asks of us our whole person and all our time – always and entirely. It asks of us our whole person and all our time – always and entirely. There is no time nor place for anything else. I consider this a **grace**, a gift, an advantage.

M. Marie Eugenie, through her grace as foundress and her long experience, harmonized the different elements that today form our contemplative and apostolic life. The Rule of Life presents this unity, but each one of us should realize it in herself as should each community.

Such a wealth and so many different observances could be a source of tension or dispersion. Unity of life is not accomplished through fidelity to the timetable or to observances although

this is a factor; it comes through the unique love of God and the Kingdom, for which the Rule marks out the path. It comes from a profound awareness of the unity of the charism. This awareness creates the conviction that our prayer is an integral part of our mission and that it will not be authentic if it does not create apostolic energy; that our apostolic activity will not be efficacious for the Kingdom if it is not rooted in prayer; that the Lord expects us to lead our people to him at adoration and to bring before him their yearnings as well as their desires and difficulties; that we lend them our voice during Office; that the gift of ourselves in building community forms our heart and mind for the mission.

Our day does not consist of a series of isolated acts but in a delicate whole which establishes a way of being and doing for Jesus and the Kingdom. It is like a stringed instrument, for if one string is too loose or too taut, all the music is out of tune. The tone, the harmony, the melody are all affected.

Unity in one's life takes times. But it does not happen automatically. To keep rules or regulations faithfully over the years is not guarantee of unity. Its source is deeper. It lies in an interior conviction-love which keeps the gaze fixed on "Jesus Christ and the extension of his Reign."

### **ENVOI**

I am not going to finish this letter which is no longer a letter but rather a working document. I have simply given guide-lines for study and dialogue. It is now up to you to continue this study as a preparation for the General Chapter in 1988.

You will notice that, in spite of its length, this document contains very little matter on each subject, just sufficient to guide your thought. Since it is but a working draft, it calls for your comments and clarifications, your corrections and disagreements. You will be able to complete with your own ideas and experiences.

Through these pages you will be able to follow the path traced for the Assumption by the Chapter of 1982 (read them in the light of the Chapter on Apostolic Life in the Rule of Life), then by the plenary Councils and the various sessions where we tried to draw up our Congregational Project more precisely. Perhaps some of you will be disappointed not to have found more ideas on woman, on the laity, on atheism or on peace...?

These pages are an invitation to go still further, to clarify still more our aims and our projects so as to canalize and direct our energies and resources better in view of the Kingdom. The Congregation, at this moment in its history, needs a project both slim and sinewy – for action: Each sister should have a very clear vision of the objectives wherever she is "missioned."

To do this work is the first step in a discernment process that will help us to centre ourselves on the essentials and to drop both the non-essentials, and those costly efforts which multiply our activities without increasing our efficiency.

Sisters say to me: "I do a lot of things but I am not sure whether what I do is useful for the Kingdom". Or worse still, "I do a great many things – and successfully – but for what Kingdom?"

In general, Assumption Sisters are not lazy, but they are often overworked. By what? Why? The Lord advises us to sit down and calculate before we build. An invitation to more thought and prayer and to less activity. To do less, but to do it at greater depth. Is this not "the decisive action in a small sphere?"

The Spirit breathes. History waits for non-one; we must keep our rendez-vous. We have grace for today, not for the problems and struggles of yesterday or tomorrow. It is a question of fighting the right battles at the right moments and in the right places.

I ask each sister to make the effort to understand the main ideas of this document and the questions that reading and studying it in community will raise. (For discernment, purity of heart and interior liberty are more useful than brilliant minds). These pages are also an invitation to all of you to prepare the Chapter, and more particularly to be responsible for the Congregation.

On one hand, imagine you are the only community of the Assumption and put all your effort into founding the Congregation for the year 2000. On the other hand, realize you are all member of one family and that you have the support of all the other communities. On each community and on the whole will depend what our Congregation will be when it crosses the threshold of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium. Each community can consider itself a "foundress."

Sister Clare Teresa

Superior General

Auteuil Paris  
Pentecost 1987