

REPORT of the Superior General*

Introduction

1- This report has been drafted in view of the Congregation's General Chapter and is addressed to the Assumptionists as well as to the sisters of the family and to the lay people with whom we collaborate. Because they are part of our larger family, their thoughts on these questions are important to us.

2- In the past the report of the General Chapter was published in two distinct parts: the first was sent to all of the religious, and the second distributed to the members of the Chapter. The first part provided an overall reflection on the Congregation, its life and mission in today's world. The second gave a fairly factual account of the work of the General government and published statistics regarding the Congregation at the time of the Chapter.

3- I decided to send to all of the religious a fairly complete report on the activity of these last years (see Chapter two of this report), for it is on the basis of this effort of animation that we are able to evaluate the life of the Congregation (Chapter three of the report) and formulate a number of proposals for the future (Chapter four of the report). The members of the Chapter will also receive a dossier with the detailed reports of the Officers, as well as other information and statistics.

4- You will understandably want to jump to Chapter four of the report, but I encourage you to read the chapters in order. Only in the light of my analysis will the ensuing proposals make the most sense.

5- This report has been drafted by the Superior General with the active collaboration of the members of the General Council. Its point of view is consequently limited, but nonetheless based on a substantial knowledge of the entire Congregation and of each of its communities. With contributions from vice/Provincial

* traduction en espagnol, français, néerlandais et portugais.

Chapters, from pre-capitular workshops and surveys, from the Preparatory Commission and from individual religious, it is our hope that this report is yet one more element that will help to open our minds and hearts to the promptings of the Spirit as we gather in Chapter in May of 2005.

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I. The Theme of the Chapter: « Many gifts in one body » United with one charism at the service of a common project¹

6- “Many gifts in one body”—the theme for the General Chapter of 2005 was chosen by the Major Superiors at the Council of Congregation in 2003. A year later, they talked together at length in order to understand as well as possible what the implications of this theme were for our religious family at this time.

A process

7- The choice of this theme is the fruit of a gradual discernment since the Chapter of 1999, which invited us to work on our charism. We realized at the Council of Congregation of 2000 that it was this charism and our common mission that united brothers scattered across the globe. Since the Jubilee year, the members of the Council reflected on the unity of our religious family, insisting on the international character of the Congregation, our cultural and linguistic variety, and our different ways of living out our Assumptionist vocation. We also realized that in a shrinking world and with diminished resources, we are called to an interdependence that is not only a practical necessity, but a witness to communion² and a central feature of our own Assumptionist charism.³ Finally, at the Council of Congregation

¹ The word “project” will be used throughout this report to translate the French word “projet”, although the meanings are not quite equivalent. The word “projet” in French refers to a statement of major apostolic goals to be realized and the means that will be used in bringing them about.

² See Pope John Paul II’s invitation to develop a spirituality of communion for today’s world, in *Novo millennio ineunte*, par. 43.

³ See E. d’Alzon, « Esprit de l’Assomption—esprit d’unité », ES 699ff.

of 2003, it occurred to us that a common apostolic project for the Congregation could be the most concrete expression of our charism and of our apostolic vocation.

The light shed by St. Paul

8- We are not the only ones to be taken with “diversity”; it is a popular theme for many today. We talk about it, however, not in a spirit of claiming rights for oppressed minorities, but in the context of Paul’s meditation on the Body of Christ (especially in I Corinthians 12 and 13). Paul’s emphasis in I Corinthians 12 is not on diversity, but on the unique source of all gifts, the Holy Spirit. In the first eleven verses of the chapter, the Spirit or the one Lord is mentioned eleven times. For Paul what gathers the community together is not the agreement of its individual members, but the one Lord who brings the community and its members into existence. Paul’s concern is different than ours might be. His purpose is not political, i.e. he does not set out to defend the “rights” of any person or group. And it is not psychological; he is not concerned about promoting the well-being or “fulfillment” of anyone by liberating his or her inner potential. In discussions of diversity today, the emphasis and starting point is more spontaneously the individual rather than the community (the body). Just how deeply ingrained in us is this un-Pauline perspective?

9- Chapter 12 is also intent on drawing out the rich variety of gifts that flow from the Spirit (verses 4-11) and the interdependence of these gifts that together constitute the body (verses 12-26). Just as all of these gifts flow from one source, so they are all meant to serve the one body (verses 7 and 20-26). Chapters 13 and 14 insist on love and mutual service as the higher gifts to which we should aspire.

10- These chapters of the Apostle can be an inspiration for us today, and an evangelical perspective on the question of diversity, which sadly too often becomes divisive. They provide us with a metaphor for community and the Church that is very concrete. Paul speaks of the Church as a “body”, suggesting that a community presents all of the challenges that living in a body has for the person. They remind us of the wealth of gifts that each person and each culture has received, and the importance of

discovering and “exploiting” those gifts for the well-being of the body. Finally, they avoid any suggestion that community imposes constraints or uniformity on its members by affirming that love is its sure foundation, love that expresses itself in respect for the person, in friendship, and in concrete support for living the life of faith and carrying out our Gospel mission.

11- St. Paul and the Assumption, I believe, go beyond ideology and superficial dichotomies.

Love presupposes and even produces difference...

Truth is by nature symphonic, as von Balthasar would put it.⁴

The kind of *unity* to which we aspire has its origin in the richness and variety of a Trinitarian God. It manifests itself in the diversity of persons and cultures and is expressed in a charism, a project and structures that nurture both diversity and communion.

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II. What the General Chapter of 1999 asked for And What We Have Done since Then

12- The theme that we’ve chosen for the Chapter has emerged gradually over the past five and a half years, but its roots go back further in time: in our work on a new *Rule of Life*, on the invention or rediscovery of practices to nurture the principles articulated in that *Rule*, and on the intense reflection on our charism and mission that preceded the last Chapter.

13- The Chapter of 1999 asked that the “re-expression of our Assumptionist charism (be) the major theme in the animation of the Congregation for the next six years.” (#3) This desire manifested a renewed pride in our vocation, a conviction that it was a gift for the Church that we needed to explore and communicate to our friends and place at the service of God’s people. During these years we have become even more aware of our shared Assumptionist character and more convinced that only together can we live it more deeply and serve the Church and the

⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Truth is Symphonic—Aspects of Christian Pluralism*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987.

world more effectively. And our lay friends, in those communities and Provinces that have made efforts to cultivate relations with the laity, have often been even more insistent than us on this priority.

14- The General Council and I, with the Council of Congregation, have taken this mandate very seriously. It has been the major theme of every report to the Council of Congregation since the Chapter, and at those meetings the members of the Council spent substantial amounts of time discussing the question. This mandate occasioned the publication of my three major letters on the themes that the Council of Congregation considered the three major elements of our charism: faith in Jesus Christ, apostolic community and the mission for the Kingdom.⁵ These three letters were preceded by one that I consider particularly important, *Falling in Love Again* (25 March 2000), and another that explained the process to be followed in studying the charism (*Re-expressing the Charism*, 29 June 2000).⁶ The Chapter of 1999 considered letters of the Superior General to be an important form of animation (#148). I have a sense that this is true, but the amount of direct feedback that I received on these letters was minimal. I have some concern that it is so difficult to gauge the effectiveness of an animation effort that requires such a heavy investment in terms of time, reflection, and even cost (for printing and distribution). The three major letters that I wrote invited the religious and the communities to reflect on specific issues and to communicate their thoughts in the Province and to the Superior General. These responses became gradually more numerous and substantial.⁷ I know that various regions and communities in the Congregation also organized sessions with lay friends, celebrations especially on the occasion of the year-long 150th anniversary

⁵ See *Faith in Jesus Christ*, Part I (25 December 2000) and Part II (28 August 2001), *Witnesses to Love* (26 May 2002), and “*Come See This Man*” (21 November 2003).

⁶ In addition to these letters for all religious, I took the initiative of drafting letters to the Senior religious and to the religious in formation, on themes raised by the General Chapter or germane to the particular group. These letters were briefer and more informal; the young people responded abundantly (by e-mail and orally) and enthusiastically.

⁷ There were 23 responses to Letter #4; 47 to Letter #5; and 20 to Letter #7.

celebration and of the beatification of the Bulgarian martyrs, and retreats on Augustinian and d'Alzonian themes—so many ways of exploring the charism and appropriating it at a deeper level. The degree of effectiveness of these initiatives will undoubtedly be made clear in the kind of reflection that takes place at the upcoming General Chapter.

15- The emphasis at our last General Chapter on the charism colored most of the decisions that it entrusted to us for realization over the past five and a half years. Some of these were entrusted to those of us in General Government, some to the vice/Provinces and their Superiors, and still others to local communities. On the basis of a review of these decisions carried out (in compliance with #147b of the General Chapter) at the 2003 meeting of the Council of Congregation, I would like to report to the entire Congregation what the General Council and I have attempted to do, and to give you some sense of how the various vice/Provinces responded to these Chapter decisions. I will do so on the basis of a review conducted at the Council of Congregation in 2003 (as requested by the General Chapter in #147b).

16- At its first meetings, the General Council studied the decisions of the General Chapter and defined the four major priorities that would guide its work over the next six years. These four priorities were as follows:

1. to follow up on the General Chapter
2. to know the Congregation better
3. to form leaders
4. to deepen fraternal relations with the sisters of the Assumption family.

- 1) *To follow up on the General Chapter has engaged us in a wide variety of activities.*

T *Re-expression of the charism*

17- We worked on the re-expression of the charism in different ways (I have already mentioned for example the letters of the Superior General), but this happened most of all through the more or less unexpected grace of the **beatification** of our brother martyrs, who enabled us to

celebrate our vocation, which they lived in a heroic manner. This beatification was a feast for the entire Assumption family and enabled us to rekindle our passion for the mission in Eastern Europe. Initiatives in connection with the 150th anniversary of our founding were likewise helpful.⁸ Finally, various communication and publication efforts (at the level of the Congregation, as well as at the Provincial level)⁹ demanded considerable energy, but seemed important to us for deepening our knowledge of the charism and for encouraging a spirit of belonging to one unique religious family. Unfortunately, the impact of such efforts is hard to measure, especially since the readers' reactions are rarely communicated even when this is asked for in a specific manner.

18- During these years, work has continued on the designing of a logo for the entire Congregation. This work should be concluded at the upcoming General Chapter. The Chapter of 1999 also encouraged us to promote the founding and/or development of centers for the study of the charism (see General Chapter #25, #132). Some individual religious have continued to pursue their intellectual and pastoral efforts along these lines, but little has been done to promote centers to encourage these efforts.

T Mission

⁸ A video on our life and mission (*150 ans de l'Assomption*), a colloquium to study the history of our missions (« The Missionary Adventure », Valpré, November 2000), a celebration of the four former Superiors General (Paris, March 2000), and the Christmas celebration at Nîmes.

⁹ Publications, out of Rome, were numerous: the *Acts* of the Colloquium on Bishop Petit (1997), the *Notices Biographiques* (Périer-Muzet), the *Anthologie d'Alzon* (Périer-Muzet), *The Assumptionists, Yesterday and Today* (Guissard), the *Manuel d'histoire* (Périer-Muzet), volumes XIV and XV of the collected letters of Fr. d'Alzon and volume XVI in the series, a catalogue of proper names in d'Alzon writings (ed. Périer-Muzet), a general index for the Rome newsletter and for *L'Assomption et ses oeuvres* (Périer-Muzet), and the *Epbémérides de l'Assomption* (Périer-Muzet). This list does not include the many publications and translations that were the initiative of the vice/Provinces and various individuals (Assumptionists and others) during the last five years.

19- In terms of the mission, a number of projects were identified as “**prophetic gestures**” to be promoted in the context of our 150th anniversary celebration (see General Chapter #58). We continue to pursue work on these projects, but at the General level we have not had enough time to solicit additional funds that would have been necessary to implement the projects as we would have liked. We also organized a **development office** (SOLIDE) (see General Chapter #63), which continues to evolve. The plan is to continue reflecting on the kind of office that we would need in this regard. In general, a number of the Chapter’s decisions under the heading “**Justice and Peace**” (#46-65) have not been pursued vigorously either at the General level, nor at the Provincial level. Is it because they were formulated vaguely or not entrusted to anyone particular for implementation? Is it because they were inadequately prepared? We must take seriously our commitment to the great causes of peace and justice in today’s world, particularly since we live in contexts where people are deprived of both. But it is important for us to give serious thought to these questions so that the next General Chapter will be in a position to help us in this regard and avoid making proposals that we do not implement.

Ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue

20- Decisions regarding **ecumenism** were addressed in a number of ways. The Council of Congregation met in Istanbul in 2002 to familiarize all of the Provincials with this particular mission, and since then our Mission in Eastern Europe has been a regular item on the Council of Congregation’s agenda. I very much regret that we have not been able to give a clear orientation more rapidly to this mission that is so important for the Assumption and for the Church, but I understand that the situation is complex and the resources, lacking. It is to be hoped that the General Chapter will pronounce itself on this matter in the context of an overall project for the Congregation. Out of a concern for ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue, the General Councils of the family reflected together on the COIA (Commission Oecuménique Inter-Assumption) and decided to modify its goals and

operation. It became the RIAD (Rencontre Internationale de l'Assomption pour le Dialogue), in order to emphasize inter-religious dialogue as well as ecumenism, and the pastoral dimension as well as the intellectual dimension (see General Chapter #40, #69g). This group has already met twice (August 2002 and August 2004).

Education and Media

21- The Chapter's decisions regarding education and the media inspired a gathering of religious and lay leaders of our Belgian colleges (Rome, February 2002) and a Chapter preparation workshop on Education and Media (Worcester, July 2004). I sense a greater interest in education in the Congregation, as reflected in the apostolic ambitions of many young people in a number of vice/Provinces, in the increased involvement of Assumptionists in institutes of higher learning, and in the foundation of new educational establishments under our tutelage (in Africa, in Chile, and in Madagascar).

22- The same is true for our work in the communications media. Bayard continues to be strong and to expand internationally, involving more Provinces in its media activities. Publishing and media initiatives have been pursued vigorously in Africa (e.g. Radio Moto in Butembo, Congo, and a series of publications by the religious in formation), and young people in Africa and Madagascar often speak of journalism as a major need and interest. It is less clear, however, that there has been any systematic effort to implement other recommendations of the Chapter in this area (see, for example, #118a, #120).¹⁰

Intellectual life

23- It should be noted that little was done to implement the Chapter's decisions regarding the intellectual life of the Congregation (see General Chapter #123-#135).

¹⁰ The Council of Congregation voted not to publish the bulletin asked for by the Chapter (see General Chapter #121), and only slight progress has been made so far in the publication asked for in #122.

Some Provinces have appointed religious responsible for intellectual formation and encouraged studies in disciplines up to the doctoral level. I have encouraged vice/Provincials to consider Rome as a formation center for brothers doing graduate study, and we have been able to secure scholarships for a number of Assumptionists studying in Roman universities. The Commission requested by the General Chapter (see #134), however, has not been created. Though I would not say that the intellectual life is forgotten in the Congregation, I sense that it is not the preoccupation of many. In a Church context where the urgent needs are many and where we want to have a tangible impact fairly rapidly, we need to consider seriously what the truly deep needs are and not be afraid to commit ourselves to an effort that does not bear immediate fruit but that has a real and long-lasting impact on society.

T *Lay People*

24- The General Chapter made a series of decisions regarding the laity involved in the life and mission of the Congregation. The Charter proposed by the Chapter (see #85) has been used in some vice/Provinces, and in general most vice/Provinces (with the exception of one or two) have worked closely with their lay friends: in Provincial Commissions, in apostolic projects, in vocation ministry, in the life of the individual communities, etc. Lay people have participated in special vice/provincial events (forums, chapters, sessions, etc.), and at the international level they have participated in at least one Council of Congregation (Mexico, 2004), in a number of Congregation sessions/workshops, and are being invited to participate in part of the General Chapter in 2005. It is hoped that this collaboration will enable the creation of the international lay-religious commission asked for by the last General Chapter (see #87).

T *Vocation Ministry*

25- With regard to vocation ministry, some initiatives have been taken at the local, vice/Provincial and continental levels. The Triduum for Vocations (see General Chapter #107) has been organized annually by the General Council, and a workshop on Vocation Ministry (see General Chapter #106) has been foreseen in preparation for the upcoming Chapter. There remains much to be done in this area.

T *Organizational Questions*

26- The General Chapter also made a number of decisions that have to do with the organization of the Congregation. At the Council of Congregation in 2000, the Province of **England** (see #212) and the Vicariate of **Korea** (see #214) were suppressed. The first became a Region of the Province of France, and Korea became the responsibility of a consortium of three Provinces and then of the Province of France alone. The decisions of the Chapter concerning **Colombia** (see #210) were implemented, and the Vicariate was dissolved in 2004 and erected by the Province of Chile/Argentina as a Region. In addition to these efforts at restructuring, a **commission of European Provincials**, created by the Chapter (see #45 and #211), met on a number of occasions to discuss common projects and to propose new structures for our European Provinces.

27- In terms of the organization of our religious family, the General Chapter urged greater international collaboration (see #40-45), and in particular the close collaboration of the Superior General and the other Major Superiors in the animation of our life and mission (see #147 and 151). As mentioned earlier, communion in the Congregation has been a constant theme since the first Council of Congregation after the last General Chapter. This led to the practice, each year, of meetings among vice/Provincials with common interests or apostolic proposals they would like to work on together. The practice has led, for example, to the creation of an international, inter-Provincial community in Quebec, to the assignment of religious for apostolic or formation purposes from one vice/Province to another, etc. We have also encouraged discussions at the Continental level, leading

up to the most recent discussions (in 2003-2004) regarding restructuring in the Congregation. The Executive Committee established at the Council of Congregation in 2004 can be seen as an expression of this desire to work even more closely together within the Congregation.

28- Chapter decisions regarding the **Apostolic Fund** (see #219-223) were respected; further proposals will be made at the upcoming Chapter. The General Bursar has continued to work with a group of **financial consultants** (see #231), and although he has encouraged the creation of **fund-raising centers** (“procures”) in every Province, no new centers have yet been established. This is a source of some concern; we need to come to the point of financial autonomy in every Province.

29- The last item that might be mentioned, regarding the implementation of Chapter decisions, is the publication of the **Acts of the Chapter** in the four official languages of the Congregation within two months of the end of the Chapter.

2) *To Know the Congregation Better*

30- We have tried to **know the Congregation better** through a variety of strategies.

31- The most important of these have been canonical visitations and the presence of members of the General Council through visits in the vice/Provinces or correspondence with the various Major Superiors or others in the vice/Provinces.

32- Canonical visits all followed the same format and were almost always made by myself with at least one other member of the General Council. I made the effort to write an individual visitation letter for every community, though I did not always succeed at this. I sent a visitation letter to the vice/Province at the conclusion of the visit and asked for the reaction of vice/Provincial and his Council(s). These letters sought to reflect on the life of the vice/Province and to make precise proposals to help the vice/Province make further progress. Approximately six months after a visit, an Assistant General visited the vice/Province to talk

about follow-up that had taken place as a result of the General visitation.

33- The religious seemed to appreciate these formal visitations, and in particular the opportunity to know the Superior General and talk with him about their own life and that of their community. That being said, we would do well to evaluate the real impact of such visitations. They represent an enormous investment in time and funds. Could we imagine a less time-consuming and costly format, one that would be more focused and perhaps more helpful to the various vice/Provinces?

34- The importance of the support provided by the Assistants General to the Major Superiors, the various Councils and Commissions in the vice/Provinces, and others cannot be underestimated. To mention only the Province of Africa, for example, in 2000-2001, every member of the General Council spent at least one month in the Province. Since then, at least one Assistant or I have visited the Province each year. We sense that this kind of presence is very important: general government needs to be “in the field” in order to know well the life and the mission of the brothers. Evidently, this is time-consuming. Unfortunately, with a reduced number of Council members, who also had to assume the work of Officers and animation of the local community, we did not do everything we thought necessary. The Assistants also wondered at times if their visits had the desired impact. They had the sense that after their visit, there was little follow through in the vice/Province, and in any case little reaction from the vice/provincial leadership. Nonetheless, we remain convinced that whatever structure we imagine for General government, it would be important to assure a substantial form of presence by the General Council in the vice/Provinces and to provide solid formation and accompaniment for leaders.

35- Publications also enabled us to nurture communication between the General government and the vice/Provinces. *AA-Info* (see General Chapter #240), the Directory of Religious (see #27), the creation of the Congregation’s web-site (see #28), the Necrology, the *Documents Assomption*, regular letters to the Major Superiors (called “SM”) are appreciated by the religious and help us to keep open channels of communication within the

Congregation. In this regard, it would be important to mention the important work of translation that took place during this time (see General Chapter #241). We should be grateful to those who worked hard at this. We considered this to be a priority, though we feel there is still work to be done, especially in terms of simultaneous translation to facilitate sessions that are genuinely international. When I see what we have done and compare it to what other international Congregations have achieved, I wonder if we really have the will to move in this direction. How can we take more seriously this very real and concrete dimension of our international character. We need to translate our words into actions. What measures will we take?

3) *to Form Leaders*

36- The formation of leaders was another of our priorities and has taken place in different ways.

T Sessions for new Provincials (see General Chapter #183) were held regularly, in different formats: in Rome, October 1999; in Nairobi, April 2000; in Rome, September 2002; in São Paulo, January 2004; in Rome, September 2004.

T Sessions for Provincial treasurers were held in Rome, May 2002 and October 2004, and for local treasurers in Santiago (2002) and Butembo, Congo (2002). (See General Chapter #190)

T An international session for secretaries and archivists was held in Rome, November 2001.

T An international session for formators (see General Chapter #181) was held in Nairobi, July 2002, to begin preparation of a new edition of the *Ratio Institutionis*. With the help of a drafting committee, two General Assistants continued this work for approximately two years and produced the draft revision of the Ratio that is being submitted for approval to the General Chapter (see General Chapter #152).

T A leadership workshop was held for Provincials and their Assistants in Rome, April 2003.

T Finally, the General Council organized the third CAFI (see General Chapter #163), an international community of formation, with the help of Fr. Miguel Diaz Ayllón (Mexico). It was held in Nîmes in July and August of 2003.

37- We did good work in this area, I believe, but this continues to be a concern. To what extent are we preparing leaders for the future? How are we prepared to accompany them? It is not simply a matter of forming managers or functionaries. It is a matter of fostering a culture of responsibility and initiative, imagination and freedom. And then of helping especially young religious to acquire the tools needed for the work of leadership. A community can subsist for a while without an effort in this regard, but it will not develop and will not do its best work.

4) *to Nurture Our Relations with the Sisters of the Assumption Family*

38- Finally, we have sought to nurture our relations with the sisters of the Assumption family through a number of means. Undoubtedly, the most effective efforts in this regard have been on the local and vice/Provincial level, where friendly relations and apostolic collaborations have continued and intensified over the past six years. At the General level, the Superiors General have continued to meet every two years, in December of 1999, 2001, and 2003. They have also met more informally on other occasions. The General Councils of the five Congregations met in the alternating years, in September of 2000, 2002, and 2004. They have engaged in a number of common projects (language courses, common sessions, the RIAD, etc.) and organized two common colloquia: on the History of the Family (January 2004) and Religious Life Tomorrow in Europe and North America (October 2004). Religious of the different families have also participated in various Chapters and sessions and animated retreats for each other.

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III. What We Have Seen in the Vice/provinces

39- One of the priorities of the General Council has been to know the Congregation as well as we possibly could. We considered such knowledge as necessary if we were to be faithful to what the *Rule of Life* says is one of the major responsibilities of the Superior General: to help the Congregation grow in fidelity to

their commitment as Assumptionist religious and in their service to the Kingdom (RL #103, #105).

40- Canonical visitations are one of the principal means we used to accomplish these goals. They made it possible for us to see the strengths and weaknesses of our religious family at this time in its history. What follows is a picture of what we have seen during these visits. This picture has been refined as a result of an analysis made by the Provincials at the 2004 Council of Congregation meeting.¹¹

Our Strengths & Our Weaknesses

The Assumptionist charism

41- Everyone agrees, with varying degrees of conviction and enthusiasm, that **our spiritual tradition and our Rule of Life are our greatest strength**. We admire the founding intuition and the spirit of the founder. We are less troubled by his nineteenth century style than in the past (especially since we have discovered that this is less difficult for our lay friends than it has been to us) and more inclined to turn to him in our own personal prayer and study. We also refer much more frequently to Saint Augustine, introduce young religious to him during their years of formation, and use him as an inspiration in our preaching and in our various pastoral activities. Though fewer of us are engaged in research on Augustine than in the past, this is probably more due to our smaller numbers than to a decline in interest.

42- We continue to be inspired by our *Rule of life* and refer to it proudly. We appreciate its Christocentric spirituality and its focus on the essentials. For example, it insists on a deep love of the Church and a zealous dedication to the service of God's people in a way that transcends easy polarities. We are challenged by the ideals to which it invites us: generosity, daring, freedom, openness, inventiveness in the mission.

¹¹ The method used is called a SWOT analysis: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

43- Our love of the founder, of the Rule and of the charism in general was noticeable in the 150th anniversary events organized in the Congregation and in every Province and is evidenced in the efforts to study the founder and to publish and translate articles and books related to him.

But...

44- We continue to have great difficulty in expressing our charism, simply and in words that people who are not of our “tribe” can understand. We explain that too easily by saying that d’Alzon wanted us to have the “spirit of the Church”, without a distinguishing feature that sets us apart. While there is some truth to that, it provides no answer to the question: “Then why did Fr. d’Alzon bother to found a particular Congregation?”

45- Related to that, we continue to be very modest and often practically invisible. There may be something admirable in that, but our lay friends are asking for more, and service to the Church demands more.

46- While we are happy with the Rule of Life, we tend to quote the same few phrases, but need to spend more time studying and thinking about the whole Rule and especially making efforts to find concrete ways and practices that will help us be faithful to the ideal it presents. We run the risk of preaching a good sermon, but not putting it into practice.

Our life of faith

47- In every region where we are located, we are painfully aware of the challenges to a serious life of faith. This is a source of suffering to many, who nonetheless continue to struggle in their desire to remain faithful. Among the religious and in our communities, there is a desire to live the faith personally and with brothers in community and to give clear witness to this fact. Common prayer is a feature in the very great majority of our communities, even in smaller communities and in our retirement communities. In the way we pray and of course in our fidelity to a life of personal prayer, we provide an important witness to those who know us. Common prayer is one of the elements that

younger religious say drew them to the Assumption. In a number of communities the brothers have found ways to talk with each other about their faith and continue to organize retreats and programs of renewal. Many individuals have committed themselves to a serious life of personal prayer. It is clear to me that the beatification of our three brothers in 2002 was a powerful reminder for us all that the call to holiness is at the heart of our vocation as Christians and as Assumptionists.

But...

48- I wonder how aware we are of the impact that contemporary challenges to the faith have on our own faith and our own capacity to live the demands of the consecrated life. Some of the brothers say our life has become too “bourgeois”, too consumerist. Is that the case? How much do we reflect on the impact that the ambient culture might be having on us? Perhaps we need to preach to ourselves more often the demands of the Gospel.

49- “Contemplation” is not a word we Assumptionists use too easily. It is true that some people say that Augustine was not a contemplative or that d’Alzon was something of an activist. But were they not both contemplatives as well? People readily see that we are very energetic and dedicated apostles. I think it is also important that they see us as men of deep personal prayer, men who spend substantial amounts of time in prayer both in private and in public. During my visits, I didn’t often see great numbers of religious engaged in personal prayer in the community’s chapel. Sometimes I wondered if personal prayer were a value for some, who more readily would have insisted on the importance of apostolic service.

50- It should be said that some communities of the Congregation do not gather for Morning Prayer and for Evening Prayer. I rarely if ever found any good reasons for that lack. More often, especially in communities whose members celebrated the Eucharist in other settings during the day, the brothers do not gather for daily Eucharist. As I wrote in “Witnesses to Love” (Letter #5, p. 21), I do not think we can say that the Eucharist is at the heart of our

common life unless we gather as a community to celebrate it on a regular and frequent basis. The solution may not be easy, but if we admit the value of this ideal, we then need to struggle to find a way.

51- Related to this question of prayer, I think, is another phenomenon that I noticed on many occasions: religious who were tired, dispirited, discouraged, without passion or motivation. While acknowledging the difficulties that religious today often face, I noticed that in the face of this suffering a number of religious simply concluded that there was no hope and that the only “reasonable” response was to hold out as best as possible until the end or to “pull the plug”.

Our life in community

52- By community, I mean of course our Assumptionist fraternity (at the local and international levels), which is the context within which we live, but I broaden the definition by insisting that the sisters of the family and the lay people who collaborate with us are also part of our community in an important way.

53- We recognize that the fraternal life is one of our distinguishing features: it is both our strength and our daily challenge. It is perhaps the feature of our life that is most attractive to young men in discernment.

Fraternal life

54- Our Assumptionist communities are almost universally welcoming, and they inspire in people and in groups around them a certain “family spirit”. I sensed a good deal of fraternal affection in Assumptionist communities, among the different generations, and in particular for our sick and older brothers, who are cared for with great attention. This fraternal affection has been nourished in some Provinces with great effort (Provincial assemblies, dialogue strategies, etc.). While in some Provinces I sense that older ideological battles have left their mark and remain unresolved, nowhere did I witness any serious discord.

55- Work on and with our new *Rule of Life* has given birth to new community “practices”. The Local Chapter is now held in the great majority of our communities. In some communities, “obedience” has become a very helpful brief daily gathering to communicate useful information and even more substantial reflections. In the Provinces, some initiatives have been taken to provide formation for those with special community responsibilities, and a great effort has been made to publish regular news/animation bulletins.

56- Our Assumptionist “community” has become more and more conscious of its international character. We are now present on every continent. There is considerable inter-provincial collaboration, encouraged by regular small-group inter-provincial reflection at the annual Council of Congregation meeting. Such collaboration and international communities exist on every continent. Since the last General Chapter, at least one new international community was founded in Quebec. This sense of belonging to one international body has been enhanced by the continuing effort at sharing resources among Provinces: through the exchange of religious, financial support given through the Congregation’s Solidarity Fund, inter-provincial aid initiatives, and the creation of a substantial Apostolic Fund for the Congregation. The international character of the Congregation has been promoted likewise by an increased effort at translation and at making religious of every culture and language feel at home in the Congregation.

The broader community with the sisters of the family

57- This fraternal spirit extends beyond the Assumptionists. Almost universally, I encountered solid and often substantial relations with **sisters of the family**. Friendship, shared prayer, and collaboration in the mission (as well as in formation and vocation ministry) are more and more the practice where two or more branches of the family are present in one place.

The broader community with our lay friends

58- This is also true in our relations with the laity. With the exception of one or another Province, lay people are involved in many cases as equals in the mission and share at least to some extent the fraternity and prayer of the religious community. They

have even made important contributions in our vocation ministry and formation programs. They are more and more asking to know better and share more deeply our charism and express gratitude for the openness of the community in their regard. Some Provinces have made substantial efforts to help "Assumptionist lay people" get organized, have foreseen formation programs for them, and have even assisted them in the drafting of a "Rule" for lay people. It should be noted that even where there are few vocations to religious life, substantial numbers of lay people continue to be drawn to our communities.

But...

59- Perhaps because it is such an important dimension of our life, we are very critical of the quality of our fraternal life. I find that there is some justification in the criticisms that are made.

Fraternal life

60- Individualism is the not-so-hidden disease that weakens our communities. This gets expressed in very concrete ways (like rooms so well equipped with computers, television, books and audio systems that no one would ever have to leave his room, were it not for the need to eat) and in less tangible ways (like apostolic assignments that no Superior or Provincial would ever dare to change). There is little sense that in one's own work the religious is contributing to a larger project. We would need to rediscover the ideal of life that Augustine presents in his Rule. He encourages us to put all things in common, to avoid making of anything our "*proprium*" or private property.

61- One of the consequences of this individualism is a sense of isolation among many. Generations feel isolated from each other. Persons feel isolated within the community; communities feel isolated within Provinces; and the sense of connection with the Congregation is thin. As one person put it: there is warmth in the community, but how much real agreement is there about the important things?

62- Difficulties communicating are one of the manifestations of the problem. Honesty and fraternal correction are severely

hampered, though this has been cultivated explicitly in a very few communities. Where brothers are honest, the honesty is too often manifested harshly and in a hurtful way. Communication at meetings often remains formal. In some communities (too numerous), meetings are avoided “because they are boring”, “because people don’t talk”, “because we’re too busy”, “because we see each other at table.” I find that we do not have much imagination when it comes to community meetings; they end up being too much like the business meetings we have to attend so often. As I said earlier, we are fairly faithful to our Local Chapters, but these are very often formal exercises, limiting themselves to organizational matters. They fail to articulate our overriding objectives for the year to come and are seldom very mobilizing for the community.

63- Transparency is a major dimension of our relations in community. Respect for “privacy” too often means that we don’t talk about what’s important to us, and we are not entirely forthcoming about our activities, our relationships and our use of money. As one young religious put it recently: “Sexuality is a forbidden subject of conversation in community.”

64- Freedom is an important value that we cultivate and defend, but freedom requires that we have a healthy relationship with authority and a strong sense of responsibility. It is often surprising to me to see how adults relate in an immature manner to Superiors and others in authority. By the same token, I find Superiors who have great difficulty genuinely ministering to brothers, limiting themselves too often to administrative matters, but not taking the pains to encounter their brothers at a deeply human and supernatural level.

65- Despite a greater international awareness, the number of international communities is not increasing in the Congregation. It is not simply a matter of welcoming others and integrating them into our own culture, but of being ready to leave our own country to go where the need calls. The challenge remains to learn languages (we have four official languages, but how many of those are operative at our international gatherings?), to be free enough to get out of our own culture and to be critical of it, and to be ready to consider what is going on in another part of the world

and in another Province to be more important than what is going on in my back yard.

The broader community with our lay friends

66- Relations with the laity vary considerably from one culture to another and from one religious to another. In certain of our Provinces, collaboration with the laity is not a priority. Is it a question of culture, of lack of interest, of principle, of persons? It is difficult to answer the question, but it seems to me that this collaboration is a part of a vision of Church that is particularly dear to us at the Assumption. All of our Provinces should think seriously about their commitment in this regard. Lay people are not at the service of the clergy to respond to their commands; they are genuine partners in the mission of the Church. It is in that spirit that we need to involve them in our mission. Our lay friends are asking for even more. In those places where they are more involved in our communities, they are also asking to be accompanied more closely. They would like more formation and direction from us, as if they were brothers and sisters in the family and in the Church and not passive consumers.

Our shared mission

67- "Assumptionists, we are religious who live in apostolic community." Zeal for the Kingdom is what inspired the founding of the Assumption. Over a century and a half, the Assumption has acquired experience in and a reputation for a number of major apostolates in the Church: education, higher study, journalism, ecumenism, pilgrimages, popular evangelization, and vocation ministry. And we have pursued this work in a number of institutions that continue to exert an important influence: Bayard (in many countries), the Nijmegen Institute (Netherlands), Études augustiniennes (Paris), Assumption College (USA), Kambali (Butembo, Congo) and Mahamba (Congo)... And this hardly does justice to the great variety of apostolates in which we are engaged; we are in fact known for this kind of variety. We are also established in some of the major capitals of the world: Moscow, Istanbul, Jerusalem, Rome, Athens, Santiago, Paris, Nairobi, London, Rio de Janeiro... And in the past especially, we have invested considerable energies in the service of "foreign" missions.

These are not simply references to the past; still today, even if more modestly, we are engaged in all of these pursuits.

68- “Working like four”—an expression from the founder that we often quote; in fact, Assumptionists work very hard. There may be examples in our Congregation of Fr. d’Alzon’s famous image of false prudence in “bed-slippers”¹², but they are rare. Assumptionists are known to be men of extraordinary apostolic energy. But they are also men who work willingly in collaboration with others. Extremely modest, they do not draw attention to themselves. Their primary focus is the Church, not their own religious family. They are driven by deeply held conviction, but are usually more preoccupied with communion and dialogue than with imposing their way, or style, or ideology. They have a strong desire to be present to men and women of this world and this time.

But...

69- The emphasis is currently on the individual and his commitment. In the past, it was on corporate commitments. The challenge in both cases, is to forge a genuinely common project. I find that most of our communities as communities have nothing to say about that which occupies most of our time and energies, viz. our apostolic work. We work as individuals, often enough pray as communities, and wonder why it is difficult to integrate our mission into our common prayer. As communities, we spend little time developing a common vision (because the emphasis is on the vision of the individual for his own work). And whether as communities or individuals, we spend little time planning, evaluating, and adjusting our apostolic activities to address better demands that are constantly changing. How discerning are we regarding apostolic choices to be made, how attentive to what the Spirit might be asking at a given moment? In my estimation, we commit too easily to an institution or activity (an agency, a parish, a school), and never ask ourselves what apostolic goal or vision we hope to achieve in such institution or activity. We can be singularly unimaginative and too little

¹² Instruction at the close of the General Chapter, 18 September 1873, ES p. 189.

responsible to real needs. We invest our energy in maintaining what we have been doing for a long while and spend little time imagining if this is still meeting the needs.

70- For lack of vision and planning, our priorities are unclear (or too numerous and therefore meaningless), and consequently choices become impossible (because there are no clear criteria that allow us to say “yes” to one thing and “no” to another). The only alternative is to add continuously and never eliminate. The consequence is to become over-extended and overworked. Our work-load becomes excessive, as individuals and as communities and Provinces, and often our life of prayer and our fraternity are the victims.

71- Finally, for lack of vision, as mentioned earlier, many of us are lacking in enthusiasm and direction. As someone put: we have no “fighting spirit”.

72- The need to reflect on our community project thus seems clear to me. Of course, such a project is not just the accumulation of each individual’s projects, a kind of “umbrella” that would include everything, but that in itself has little meaning. Rather than building a project on the basis of individual projects, we need to go in the opposite direction : from the community to the individual. The common project inspires, orients and even gives birth to the individual projects. If we want to fight against the individualism about which we complain, we need to take seriously this effort to build a common project. The autonomy of each individual has become so important that in the face of such a project we could be afraid, we could try to “protect” our interests. To succeed at this, you need courage and lucidity, and the role of the Superior in the process is indispensable. You need a Superior who can listen, who can discern, and who can give his opinion and render the service of making a decision.

Vocation Ministry & Formation

73- Young men continue to be attracted to the Assumption in a number of the regions where we are located. Original initiatives in **vocation ministry** have been taken in a few of these regions. Some Provinces more than others have invested personnel in this effort and have organized good programs for the accompaniment of young men in discernment. In general, I think there is a greater awareness that more effort is needed in this domain.

74- We are all pleased with the quality of the formation guidelines that the Congregation has given itself in the *Ratio Institutionis*. Novitiate programs have been organized systematically, in keeping with these guidelines. In general, also, there is a serious effort to provide a solid intellectual formation for our young religious; a number in recent years have been encouraged to pursue graduate studies, even to the doctorate. It should be recognized that for some Provinces, like in Africa, Madagascar, and Brazil, where young religious are numerous, the formation investment has been considerable.

But...

75- **Vocation ministry** in the “northern” countries is in crisis. Undoubtedly, the reasons are numerous, but it is important that we reflect on the problem and provide some response. We cannot simply throw in the towel. Among other questions that need to be raised is one regarding our own sense of vocation, our own faith in God’s intervention in a human life, our own conviction of the value of religious life, and the nature and quality of our own witness. What would attract a young person to our community today?

76- There are some evident needs in the area of **formation**. In countries where there are many candidates, as in countries where there are few, we have too few trained, experienced formators. Candidates and young religious today need to be closely accompanied and for long periods of time. Do we see the need? Will we provide the formators needed for the task?

77- Although the *Ratio* foresees a formation program for postulants, most Provinces admit that the formation provided to postulants is deficient. This is less true for novices and for those in temporary vows. What is more lacking at that level is accompaniment and the preparation of reports that will contribute to the formation process rather than “terrorize” the candidate. At that level, it is important to be educating young religious to freedom and responsibility. That can only be done in small groups and through close fraternal accompaniment by the formator. Also at that stage, we must invest more energy and be more systematic about apostolic formation. That requires not only time spent in apostolic activity by the young Assumptionist, but workshops, reflection, study, and supervision by someone more experienced in ministry. Finally, in the area of formation, a word should be said about continued formation. Ever since the disappearance of “probation” for religious fifteen and twenty years after their profession and ordination, we have not found an adequate way to encourage systematically the continued spiritual/religious education of our confreres. The need is great, perhaps especially today. I hope the General Chapter will consider this question seriously and initiate a response.

Administration and Management

78- The discussion in which we have been involved for a few years regarding structures for the government of the Congregation has already borne fruit. The goal of this kind of reflection is to find the best means possible to favor our life in apostolic community, for every structure is at the service of life. It is evident to us, in General government, that with the structure and the personnel currently in place we have not been able to render the service that has been asked of us. Consequently, we will propose some changes in this regard. In addition to this, we think it necessary to change our regional/provincial structures to allow for a greater flexibility in view of the common project of the Congregation, to assure better animation in all regions of the Congregation, and to permit the rich cultural variety that exists to express itself.

79- For a while now we have taken leadership training seriously. The work of the leader cannot be improvised; it requires preparation, even if on the job training is very effective. The “resources” that require the most careful “management” are our confreres. This requires that we discern carefully the gifts of each one and define clearly the priorities of the community so that every member can make his best contribution for the mission and for the good of all.

80- We continue to make progress the area of financial management. Little by little the younger province are being equipped with management tools that are better adapted than pervious ones. By attending various workshops, several provincial treasures have been able to acquire a competence which better allow them to exercise their role and, as a result, to better shed light on the decision of provincial councils. A system of accounting that is coherent and trustworthy allows for greater transparence in financial matters : this allows for more exact transmission of information, for the assumption of responsibility by appropriate parties, and the maintenance of confidence. Everywhere financial advisory committees have been formed.

81- In terms of the organization of our regions and the entire Congregation, a number of efforts have been made to adjust structures so that they are more responsive to actual community and apostolic realities and needs. Such changes have been or are being made for Korea, North America, England, Colombia, Europe, etc. At the level of the continents, various collaborations have been pursued, and more recently all have been involved in conversations regarding further adaptation of structures to suit our needs.

But...

82- Provincial councils do not always take into consideration the financial implications of their decisions. Since both human financial resources are limited, these decisions can often result in an unfortunate set of priorities. Each province must establish clear priorities – which is not always the case. Here and there, there’s still progress to be made in preparing a budget and keeping to it.

83- We have spoken a lot about financial self-sufficiency. Nevertheless, we have achieved little. The Chapter of 1999 invited Provinces without a development office to establish one. Alas, at a time when the Solidarity Fund cannot answer all requests, we've made little progress in this regard. Mention above was made concerning the partial failure of SOLIDE. In wealthier provinces the income from development efforts is diminishing while expenses are rising. Revenue from endowment has plateaued. At present, inter-provincial solidarity is suffering the consequences. The General Chapter will have to look into the larger question of the financial stability of the Institute.

84- Certain older provinces, though well organized, have had problems in finding men willing or able to serve as treasurer. Fortunately, accounting work can be delegated to competent lay-people. On the other hand, responsibility for decision-making cannot be delegated. We are coming to experience here a new kind of fragility.

Conclusion

85- This provides a general overview of the strengths and weaknesses that characterize us at this time in our history. Little has been said about the demographics of the Congregation and some of the questions that these raise. The statistics that we are currently preparing and that will be distributed to the Capitulants will provide a quantified portrait of the Congregation, today and in the years to come. You can easily imagine what the portrait will look like: a certain overall stability in our membership, but the movement toward the newer regions of the Congregation will continue. The "older" regions will undoubtedly become weaker and weaker: they are always feeling considerable fragility. But what is there behind this quantified portrait?

86- When Cardinal Lustiger was asked how many priests his diocese needed, he responded: "As many as the Lord wants to give us." How many religious does the Assumption need? Ours is a precarious situation, in the "north" as well as in the "south, and that could discourage us. It seems to me that a feeling of self-

sufficiency could be even more dangerous for us. Precariousness is not to be sought after, but when it is “given”, should we not “benefit” from the experience to rediscover the deeper sense of our life and mission?

E

IV. Moving ahead

87- Aware of our weaknesses, I sense an urgent need to move forward, but I do so with confidence because I am also aware of the strengths that are ours and the grace of the call we have received. The suggestions flow from the preceding analysis of the Congregation, and from our familiarity of the issues we are facing in the Church and in society, in the different cultures in which we live and work.

In terms of mission...

88- **...what is most needed are clear mission priorities or, as I have said at other times, an apostolic project.** This is needed for the Congregation, for each Province, for each community, and I would say for each brother.

89- Such a project will allow us to address some of the problems that were identified earlier: the individualism that characterizes the way we live and work, a certain lack of enthusiasm and passion due to a lack of awareness of ultimate objectives, a kind of paralysis and lack of imagination for lack of ongoing attentiveness to the active presence of the Spirit in our lives and work.

90- So much has been said about apostolic projects. At every level, the project spells out the *major apostolic objectives* we want to achieve and indicates the *particular means* (or apostolic activities) that will allow us to achieve our objectives. The major apostolic objectives should be conceived in terms that are inspiring and mobilizing, but precise enough that they make the hard choices possible. The particular means should be very concrete, and indications should be given as to how these means will be implemented, evaluated, and adjusted.

91- At the level of the Congregation, the project should spell out priorities that orient the Provinces in their own choices. And if we are truly a community that goes beyond Province boundaries, should we not give a certain importance, if not priority, to the international initiatives of the Congregation and respond to the calls that go beyond our own interests? Of course there is a balance to strike between insertion into a specific place and concern for the universal Church, but I sense that an attitude which tends to be individualistic could blind us to the call to “strike out into the depths.”

92- In terms of the Province, it is a matter of elaborating a project that is inspired by the project of the Congregation, keeping in mind the cultures and the particular needs of each region.

93- The effort of discernment that an apostolic project requires will help us

- % to address the genuine needs of God’s people, for only that will motivate us in any lasting way;
- % to work and witness as a community “with one mind and one heart”, both among us as religious and with the sisters and lay friends who collaborate with us;
- % to be good stewards of the call and the gift that we have received by imposing a more rigorous method of discernment, planning, and evaluation.
- % And in particular to make the necessary choices in situations where resources are generally not unlimited.

94- I will not repeat here what I wrote in Letter #7, “Come, See This Man”. There you will find a fairly developed analysis of the charism as presented by the Founder and of the great causes that challenge us in today’s world. In the light of this analysis, therefore, I suggest that the Congregation adopt four major apostolic objectives for the years ahead.

1) *Young people*

95- We should be present to great numbers of young people, wherever they gather, and through a prolonged contact with them seek to have a lasting impact. Where we are involved in parishes, we should “specialize” in young people, make them the pastoral priority of the parish, invite adults to focus

on the accompaniment and formation of young people. Institutions of learning are obvious places for meeting young people. We should be looking for new ways to strengthen our presence in academic settings without delay if we are serious about wanting to be in contact with young people, and why not do so in collaboration with the sisters of the family who are still very involved in this area? We should strengthen our volunteer programs and aim to involve 50-100 young people each year through the Congregation. I think these programs will remain weak if they continue to be operated independently in our various Provinces. Where personal charism and opportunity allow we should become involved in movements (Scouts, charismatics, etc.) and special events (World Youth Days, pilgrimages, etc.) The message is clear: young people should be a priority for us, the way they have been for John Paul II.

2) *The world of learning: universities, media, research, publications*

96- Education, publication, communication—if we want to have a deep, lasting and broad impact, these are apostolic activities to be taken seriously. This is the kind of impact that Fr. d'Alzon wanted to have on society. When he swore off politics in 1848¹³, he turned to education to realize his desire to transform society. It is not the only Assumptionist apostolate, but it can be a particularly effective one.

97- In certain Provinces, a number of religious have been encouraged to pursue their studies in order to teach or pursue research at the university level. This is a special and rare charism, but when we find it, we should encourage it as much as possible in order to assure a permanent presence of Assumptionists at the forefront of learning. In my estimation, we should not limit ourselves to the disciplines of theology and philosophy, especially if we want to assure that men of faith with the perspective that is proper to them be present in every domain of human learning. In particular, it would be advisable for our brothers to pursue such work in collaboration with others and to be concerned about putting

¹³ See his letter to Mère Marie-Eugénie Milleret of 9 July 1848 (Data Base, B10579).

the fruit of their study at the service of their Assumptionist confreres.

98- It has often been said: an Assumptionist is a communicator. It is part of our genes. This remains true of young Assumptionists today. We would do well to encourage the modest publication and media initiatives emerging in various Provinces and to prepare young people to work in these domains. And does not the development of Bayard today invite the entire Congregation to respond and not simply one Province?

3) *Dialogue among cultures and religions, and in particular among Orthodox Christians*

99- Fr. d'Alzon would have us be men of communion, in society and within the Church. To respond to this insight of the Founder and to the call that Pope John Paul II has made along these lines, we should first of all pursue this objective by intensifying our efforts to be present among Orthodox Christians, which today will require patience and imagination. We have acquired an impressive reputation and experience in this domain and should put that to work today, albeit in a different way. Without abandoning an ecumenism of theological and historical dialogue, could this be the moment for pastoral ecumenism? Whatever form it takes, we should be answering the call to go East.

100- The dialogue with the Orthodox Churches might not be the priority of every Province (even if every Assumptionist ought to feel involved at some level), but the concern for dialogue and for the encounter of the other and of different cultures should find expression in every Province, by means of very concrete apostolic initiatives and by means of the effort within the Congregation itself to know well and to respect the different cultures represented in our communities. If we want do not want respect for diversity to engender division, ideology and even violence, if we want to take the cause of peace seriously, then we need to learn concretely how to discover the other, to allow ourselves to be discovered, and to broaden our spirit by means of such encounters.

101- This apostolic priority can also be pursued concretely by a greater presence in Asia, where practically half of the human race is located and where the call to the Congregation seems very clear.

4) *Evangelization for today*

102- Pastoral care is not enough. In many parts of the world, even in the younger Churches, our pastoral efforts are not reaching those many Catholics who rarely cross the threshold of the church building. For those of us involved in parish ministry, this should challenge us to re-examine our apostolic project. We could bemoan the absence of greater numbers in our churches, or we could see in this phenomenon an invitation to renew radically our understanding and methods of evangelization. It seems to me that evangelization today must of course help the faithful respond, in a manner appropriate to the laity, to the call to holiness, but evangelization must also focus on the marginalized, those for whom the Church has little meaning. They might be the materially poor, the socially outcast, or those who have difficulty seeing the relevance of the faith in the modern world. If we want to take seriously the call to promote justice and to transform society, it is to this world that we must look with great care.

103- And it is not only in the “classic” places, that is, in parishes, that we should invest our energies. On the contrary. In recent years, we have seen how effective great gatherings of people and special events can be for reaching a public that does not frequent churches. I am thinking of pilgrimage centers, youth rallies (like World Youth Days), pilgrimages. But this kind of presence requires careful thought and organization, good preparation and clear strategies.

In terms of apostolic community...

104- ...what is most needed is a simpler, clearer witness to a life of discipleship lived in fraternity.

105- I sense that this witness has become obscured. Community relations are cordial, but wanting for human and spiritual depth. We respect the demands of the consecrated life, but are the vows lived as positive values that give meaning to our life?

106- As apostolic religious, if we want to counter the real temptation of “doing one’s thing” rather than God’s, then we need to focus on the common project as described earlier. We need to assure that our communities are small enough to make genuine dialogue at a personal level more likely to occur. I do not see how we can be sustained in our faith today unless we have this kind of support from our community in the form of ongoing conversation about the life of faith. We also need to cultivate what I would call truth-telling or what Augustine would call fraternal correction. It may be difficult, but it is a Gospel imperative. Struggling with this might teach us important things about ourselves, about others, about the truth itself.

107- To live poverty more clearly, we need to strip away some of the possessions and expensive habits, we need to put everything in common and “possess” nothing without the permission of the brothers (cars, allowances, personal bank accounts, equipment), cultivate transparency, and find ways to be present to the poor in an ongoing way.

108- To live chastity more clearly, we need to be attentive to our need for and style of entertainment, cultivate freedom in our relations with others, be genuinely affectionate toward the brothers, and encourage the growth of friendship in our communities.

109- To live obedience more clearly, we need a common project that calls us to transcend our personal agenda and Local (Provincial and General) Chapters that are precise enough to call us to obedience. Obedience is easy if we have never had to accept to do something that we would not have chosen on our own. We also need Superiors who invite us to talk with them at a certain

depth, who challenge us from time to time, and who remind us often what our *raison d'être* and our common project are.

110- This call to a clearer witness as disciples of Jesus Christ is not simply a call to greater rigor. It is a call that engages the whole person and that appeals to our deepest desires. It is in fact a call to holiness and at the same time a call to genuine humanity. It is not rigor that gives effective witness; it is the joy of living as a disciple of Christ.

In terms of structures...

111- Every social body needs means and an organization to implement its project. A living body inevitably adapts these means according to changing conditions. Our community, at the local, Provincial and world levels, should have the structures that allow it to respond to the demands of the consecrated life and the mission. If we want a Congregation that responds to the rich diversity of cultures and at the same time to the charism and the project that unite us, then we need the structures to do this.

%How do we assure, for example, the representation of different cultures in the Congregation in governmental bodies (especially the Council of Congregation and the General Chapter)?

In the case of certain Provinces that become Regions in order to lighten their administrative structure, we need to find structures that will allow them to make their particular contribution.

%How do we encourage religious on the same continent to meet regularly for purposes of formation, reflection and apostolic planning?

%How do we assure that the various elements of our common, inter-provincial mission are effectively implemented?

%How do we assure that we have a sufficient number of religious on the General government team and in the community in Rome to meet the demands placed upon them?

The detailed reports of the Assistants, who were required to be Officers as well as Assistants (as in the case of the Secretary General and the Bursar General), clearly show that this accumulation of duties made it impossible to do all that was required.

How do we assure an ongoing effort to learn languages and to make it possible for everyone to participate fully in the life of the Congregation as long as he knows at least one or two of its official languages?

112- If we want to give flesh to our charism, we need to be sure that we have the right structures for the religious “body” that we are today.

In terms of formation...

113- **...we need formation programs that help us be more fully human, more fully men of faith, and more fully Assumptionist.** In order for this to happen, we will need to insist on the accompaniment of brothers.

114- The formation that is needed is not just for the early stages of our religious life. We need solid initial, professional and continuing formation. It should begin with careful vocational discernment for young men who express an interest in our way of life, and careful accompaniment should be provided even during the last stages of our life. We need formation as human beings, as religious, as men of faith, and as apostles.

115- Every departure of a religious makes us question the effectiveness of our formation and of the accompaniment that we provided for our brother while he was in community. At the beginning of my mandate, Cardinal Lustiger of Paris said to me: “Do not think that there are no young men interested in religious life and the priesthood. But those who do come need to be accompanied, accompanied, and accompanied.” The abbess of an Augustinian monastic community of thirty sisters (with four novices and four postulants) repeated the same thing: those who come are of extraordinary quality in terms of professional education and faith experience, but they are in great need of the most basic kind of human, religious and spiritual education.

116- Our problems in this regard are clear: too few formators, too few formators who are trained and experienced as formators, too little time spent in the personal accompaniment of young religious, and to judge by our actions too little conviction of the

importance of this kind of formation. I understand the problems. In some cases, there are too few young people in formation, and consequently we are “out of practice” and not well organized. In other cases, there are too many people in formation or their problems are too serious and we do not have answers that we consider adequate.

117- We will begin to address these problems when we consider formation to be a priority. A Provincial long ago told me he assigned his “best” people as formators. I take that to mean that formators must be rich in humanity and experience, solid in their vocation, with a good knowledge of the Assumption and a gift for listening and discerning.

118- But, as I said, formation is important not only for young religious. It is important that we spend time forming leaders, people who can assume particular responsibilities in our communities as Superiors, treasurers, pastoral leaders. This is especially critical in our younger, expanding regions, but hardly less critical in the aging and at times depressed parts of the Congregation.

119- Finally, formation is important for religious who have been involved “in the works” for a certain number of years. They need time to think about the challenges to the faith of older religious, to re-discover first loves, and to study more deeply the charism and the theology of religious life. Taken up with professional and pastoral duties, will they take the time that is needed unless the Congregation helps them in this regard?

In terms of our life of faith...

120- **...we need to develop a deeper, more explicit spiritual sense** (see Letter #3 and Father d’Alzon’s constant invitation in this sense¹⁴)

The debate raged between a faith openly proclaimed and one lived more discretely. I am not asking the question in terms of pastoral

¹⁴ “We tend to be very concerned about the mission we do on the outside, but too little about the one that is required on the inside.” Conference to the Religious of the Assumption, 13 February 1869 (ES p. 707).

strategies, but at the personal level: In what do I believe? What gives meaning to my life?

121- Already in 1970, it was René Voillaume's opinion that the crisis of religious life was a crisis of faith.¹⁵ It was his contention that, unwittingly, religious had begun to put into question a series of fundamental beliefs that were at the foundation of the consecrated life: in a God who is Creator and Lord, in the eschatological orientation of human life, etc. The result has been a kind of "practical atheism" as Fr. Hervé Stephan used to call it.¹⁶ There is enough evidence to suggest that he may not have been wrong.¹⁷ Some of the observations I made in analyzing the state of the Congregation would corroborate this.

122- It is time to re-discover our contemplative vocation (not in the mold of Teresa of Avila, whom Fr. d'Alzon nonetheless told us to take as a teacher, but in the mold of Augustine). A more explicit faith, that makes more regular reference to God in our daily life, which we reread frequently in order better to discern the work of the Spirit, which transforms work into a mission, a difficult human relation into an experience of mercy. Is it too simple to say, as I did to fifty young Congolese brothers who renewed their vows recently, that an hour a day at private prayer would transform their lives?

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V. The Major Question That Remains

123- As I come to the end of this report, I remain somewhat dissatisfied. It is clear that there is much that is good in the life and mission of the Assumption today, but I sense that all that is

¹⁵ René Voillaume, *La vie religieuse dans le monde actuel*, Ottawa, 1970.

¹⁶ With an apt phrase, the likes for which he was famous, Fr. Ernest Fortin, a.a. used to call it "debonair nihilism".

¹⁷ See the interview of Cardinal Poupard on 25 July 2004, « L'incroyance dans le monde » (www.zenit.org).

good could blind us to the fact that we might not have a good answer to the most important question of all: “Why?”

124- It is the question that plagues me and that led me to write an editorial for the September 2002 issue of *AA-Info*, entitled “Why?” Permit me to quote a brief paragraph:

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

125- I have listened to so many Provincials, one again just recently, tell me that a good number of the religious in his Province seem tired, somewhat dispirited, even while they continue to put in a good day’s work. They are involved in interesting and worthwhile ventures, projects that render real service to people, making the world a better place to live. And yet they remain bored, tired, discouraged. Could it be because they don’t have an answer to the “Why?” question? Could it be that they do not even know that the question is important?

126- It is a very important question. It is clearly important for the mission. Answering that question would help us to define our “vision” and to devise apostolic strategies to bring it about. But I think the question is important most of all to help us address what I consider to be a gradual erosion that has taken place in religious life.

127- It is important to ask the question and urgent to find some answers. It is urgent in the “North”, where people are tired. It is urgent in the “South” where motivation for coming to religious life is often unclear and where freedom is hampered. It is a question that has to do with the meaning and direction of our life.

128- I urge you at the end of this report to take the question seriously. Of course, some have asked it and provided their own answers. I refer you once again to what Pope John Paul II wrote

in *Novo millennio ineunte*¹⁸ regarding the source of all meaning for our mission. I also refer you to our motto... which, do not forget, is in two parts. Or have you forgotten the second part of the motto?

129- But what is your answer to the question?

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Conclusion

130- A General Chapter is a *kairos* moment in the life of a Congregation. The agenda for our upcoming Chapter was already sketched out in Letter #6, “Many Gifts, One Body” and will be further elaborated by the Preparatory Commission, which is preparing the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the Chapter. Like any *kairos* moment, we need to be attentive if we are to respond to the grace that is offered.

131- In your prayer before the Chapter, individually and in community, I invite you to meditate two Gospel passages that address the same challenge: leaving everything behind (youth, age, illness, discouragement, wealth, poverty, self) to follow Christ.

132- Some of you may identify with **Nicodemus** (John 3), especially if you feel like an experienced and somewhat weary and cynical old man. This is a good text for Provinces that are getting older and where a certain interior poverty is imposed. Nicodemus needed to be reborn, but that could not happen unless he opened himself to the grace. Nicodemus had given up; he decided that God could do nothing. His was a serious spiritual problem, and because of his “wisdom” he was not in the best position to learn something new. What would being reborn mean for him? What would it mean for our older Provinces?

¹⁸ *Novo millennio ineunte*, #42 and #49. See also *Starting Afresh from Christ—A Renewed Commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium*, Instruction of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, 19 May 2002.

133- Others of you may identify with **the rich young man** (Matthew 19:16ff). We do not know how much money he had, but he had youth on his side. Perhaps this is a good text for our younger Provinces, where there are many vocations, even though material poverty is often a real fact of life. Jesus invites the young man not to be distracted by his wealth or his youth, but to focus on what is essential and to leave the rest behind.

134- Why not reread these texts, pray over them, talk about them in community. Jesus invites Nicodemus and the young man to find meaning in their lives in places that they had not considered until then. Do they help you answer the “Why?” question?

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4 October 2004 – Feast of Saint Francis of Assisi