

Our Eastern Missionary Journey

150 years ago

“May your Kingdom come!”

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The Fathers and the Oblates today in the Eastern mission.

“Thy Kingdom come!

Father d’ALZON proposed this motto to Mother Eugénie as a motto for her congregation. He found it in the *Constitutions* of the sisters of Marie Thérèse who were working in Nîmes at the *Refuge*, and later on, he thought it was the best simple motto his Assumption could have.

So he gave it to the two congregations he founded : the **Augustians of the Assumption** and the **Oblates of the Assumption**.

Little by little, it became the motto of the whole Assumption family.

This motto “*Thy kingdom come*” was joined to the basis of his spirituality :

“ For the love of our lord Jesus-Christ”.

He writes in our *Directory* :

“We must love Jesus-Christ and all he loved : the Virgin Mary, his mother, and the Church, his spouse.”

That explains the adventure on which he sent his Brothers and Sisters, an adventure we refer to in our Assumptionist language as :

“The Near Eastern Mission”.

1 - The call of the Church

- **Father d’ALZON ‘s love of the Church.**

The church of France into which Emmanuel d’ALZON entered following his ordination in Rome was a church that wanted to rebuild itself, after the Revolution, but to rebuild itself independently of Rome. It is referred to as the “*gallican*” church.

Father d'Alzon had a quite different way of thinking, he wanted a French church united to Rome an "*ultramountain*" church. (meaning beyond the Alps, mountains which separate France and Italy). All his life, Emmanuel d'ALZON would fight for this idea.

He chose the diocese of Nîmes, not because he was born in Le Vigan, - his family lived in Lavagnac in the diocese of Montpellier - but because there was a majority of Protestants in Nîmes and he wanted to convert them to Catholicism. It was the "*oecumenical*" theology of that period.

He wanted in this way, to work for the unity of the Church - Jesus-Christ's last wish on this earth.

These are the two aspects of his spirituality relating to the Church : to work for the unity of the church of Jesus-Christ, linked to Rome. He used to say :

"Work with Rome, sometimes without Rome, never against Rome".

When his mother died in 1860 : he inherited part of the family's wealth. He wanted to use it to buy The Cenacle in Jerusalem, to create a seminary for the Maronite rite.

- **The Pope's request**

On June 3rd 1862, while in Rome, Emmanuel d'Alzon heard the words of Pope Pius IX :

"I bless your works of the East and the West".

He understood that his Congregation was at a turning point.

Following a dialogue, it became clear that the Pope wanted the Assumption to go to the east of Europe to help the Christians of Bulgaria to be united with Rome but keeping the Byzantine rite.

The reality was that the Bulgarians were still Turkish subjects and wanted to be united to Rome to avoid the Greek Patriarcate which asked them for a lot of money.

At once, Emmanuel d'Alzon gave up his idea of spending his fortune on the Cenacle and decided to use it to respond to the Pope's wish.

- **Father Galabert offers himself to take responsibility for this mission.**

Victorin Galabert left for Constantinople (former name of Istanbul) in November of the same year, to study the situation. He knew nothing at all of what he was about to find. Neither did he know what to do or where to go. He had no men and no money.

But He was a man of great faith and with a lot of patience.

Victorin Galabert was a very clever man : doctor in medicine, theology and canon Law, but very humble and with an incredible capacity for work. He actually created a Bulgarian/French Dictionary. He kept a diary which has been published in recent years and which gives us a lot of information concerning Bulgaria (its government and customs) the life of the brothers and sisters.

Father d'ALZON wrote to him on Dec 19th 1862 :

“I don't ask you to be shrewd, you will never be that, I ask you to be a saint”.

In 1865, Bishop Raphael Popov represented the Bulgarians united with Rome. Father Galabert accompanied him during his pastoral visitations. Bishop Popov had him as his primary advisor. Bishop Popov and several Eastern bishops asked Father Galabert to be their theologian during the First Vatican Council, in 1870.

In 1876, Father Galabert was appointed superior of the Eastern mission while Sister Jeanne de Chantal Dugas was appointed superior for the Oblates - she was part of the seventh group of Oblates who left Nimes for the mission (where she spent about 50 years).

- **Father d'Alzon's journey to Turkey**

Father d'ALZON joins Father Galabert in February of the following year : 1863. Both of them quickly understood that whatever they wanted to

do, they would need women to enter families, to look after children and to engage in medical work.

It was Father d'ALZON 's first and last journey to the Eastern Mission. His health did not permit further journeys.

2 - The foundation of the Oblates of the Assumption

- **Father Galabert's requested sisters**

He thought sisters would come quickly to help him and he keeps asking for them in his letters to Father d'ALZON during this time.

Naturally Father d'Alzon asks Marie Eugenie to give him sisters for this mission. At first she agrees and together they made plans. Father d'Alzon organized their arrival with bishop Brunoni, who was the Apostolic Delegate in Constantinople: four sisters would start a community for adoration and a training college. But during the year 1864, the situation changed. The Religious of the Assumption said they couldnt go because they had no sisters able to do the job. Then Father d'ALZON and Mother Eugenie tried to find another way : they would create a third section in the congregation of the Religious of the Assumption : *the Oblates* who would be permitted to leave the community for their work.

The Religious of the Assumption were semi contemplative sisters, they did not go out but remained within the convent praying, adoring and teaching. They had *lay sisters* who did the housework, shopping and so on. Father d'Alzon and Mother M Eugenie discussed at great length what the life of the Oblates would be and their place within the Religious of the Assumption. Mother Eugenie felt the *Oblates* would not be able to pray with the others sisters and could not live community life since they would be obliged to go out during the day.

- **Father Hippolyte Saugrain**

Father d'ALZON disagreed with her about this and decides to create his own congregation. But he keeps the name of *Oblates* and he added “*of the Assumption*” as they were going to live the same spirituality as the Brothers. The *Constitutions* and the *Directory* were written only in the feminine... From this point on, we feel that the friendship between Father d'ALZON and Marie Eugenie changed. They are not so close even if they retained a good relationship. Father d'ALZON had several disappointments in his search for women to start his new congregation, finding a co- founder for his *Oblates*... one was ill, the other said *yes* and then *no*...Finally Father Hippolyte Saugrain who was Master of Novices in Le Vigan found country girls ready to give their life to God, whatever the work was and wherever God would send them. Mother Eugenie helped by sending sisters to train the first girls who joined the *Oblates of the Assumption*.

- **Rochebelle 1865 : Our Lady of Bulgaria**

On May 23rd Father d'Alzon blessed the house where the 6 first Oblates would start religious life.

Father d'ALZON establishes their lives on three basis :

“ *work to survive - prayer of adoration - penance for the unity of the Church*”.

The next day , he celebrated mass in the chapel and placed the blessed sacrament in the tabernacle. 15 women came from Nimes to welcome the postulants and among them was Marie Correnson. She cried a lot because she was not among the postulants. On May 25th, bishop Plantier blessed a statue of the Virgin Mary in the garden (that statue has been lost). The sisters made a retreat and the 7th girl arrived to join the group. Father d'Alzon wrote to Father Galabert “*those girls are not as well educated as the Religious of the Assumption but they will be closer to the poor in Bulgaria*”. This first novitiate lasted 3 years. After a year 5 of them went to work in the college of the Assumption in Nîmes to take care of the boys and to be trained for the work they would do in Bulgaria. After a few months they were 12. It was in the college chapel that Father d'ALZON gave them the leather Augustinian ceinture (Letter 2872 Sept 1st 1866).

- **Marie CORRENSON co-founder of the Oblates of the Assumption**

She started her formation in secret with Father d'Alzon because her parents did not approve of her decision. When the 2 sisters lent by Marie Eugenie left, she decided to go. She was 25. She left home on June 27th 1867.

A few months later, in 1868, she left the Vigan and arrived at the college of the Assumption. On April 18th she made her perpetual profession in the chapel of the college. The day after, 5 sisters pronounced, in their turn, perpetual vows.

3- The first years of the mission

- **Difficulties and joys**

The first 5 sisters who made perpetual profession on April 19th left for Bulgaria on April 25th. Father d'Alzon, Mother M Eugenie and Marie Correnson went with them as far as Marseille to see the boat sail off. They arrived in Constantinople on May 7th. Father Galabert was waiting for them with the consul of France.

in On May 24th, 3 years after the foundation, they opened their first school in Andrinople (today Edirne in Turkey)

Sister Valérie was in charge of the school.

Sister Thérèse ran a free school.

Sister Marguerite and M Colombe were nurses.

Sister Helen was the cook.

In 1876, the Russo Turkish war began. Bulgarian villages were entirely destroyed by the Turks. The sisters gave themselves to nursing, feeding

and caring for the victims on all sides, irrespective of nationality or religion. An epidemic of typhus occurred during the war and one sister died nursing the wounded. Later, in 1894 an epidemic of cholera broke out all over Bulgaria.

The Russo-Turkish war ended with the liberation of Bulgaria : as a result of their work, the Assumption won the lasting respect of the Local Authority leaders as well as the people.

There were numerous difficulties - experienced first by Father Galabert but the sisters quickly bore the consequences.

Father Galabert was away very often : he was obliged to travel the country with bishop Popov. He had to go to France for congregation meetings. He went to Rome several times seeking advice but he never received clear explanations or orientations.

In Bulgaria, he had problems with the Resurrectionist Fathers who were planning to join the Assumptionists (fortunately they never did).

He had problems also with the Bulgarian Bishops of the latin rite who did not agree with the Greek Catholic rite. Rome granted the Fathers of the Assumption the right to celebrate in both rites.

Another difficulty was that the sisters as well as the brothers had no money, they didn't eat properly, some of them fell ill, others died. Father Galabert kept asking Father d'ALZON to send money and Father d'Alzon promised but rarely sent any.

Although Father d'ALZON never visited his brothers and sisters, they knew he was supporting the mission because of the enormous exchange of correspondence between them and France. As for the Oblates, they relied completely on Father Galabert, because Marie Correnson never went to the mission because of her health.

- **Father d'ALZON 's death**

When Father d'ALZON died, it was a big loss for the brothers and sisters.

The Assumptionists had two communities in the Eastern Mission : one in Philippopoli and one in Andrinople. The Oblates had the same.

The choice Father Picard asked the Oblates to make (to choose between their co-founder : Mother Correnson or himself) and the consequences, were a shock for the Oblates who really did not know what was best but could not imagine being separated from the Fathers since they were so far from France.

- **Father Galabert's death**

Even before Father d'ALZON 's death, Father Galabert showed several signs of weakness and was very tired. So, in 1884, he passed the responsibility for the mission to Father Alexandre Chilier while he went on with his work and travels. When he went to visit his brother in Montbazin, the village where he was born, in the south of France, (where his family lives to this day), before going back to the mission, he died in Nimes. He was only 54 years old.

3. - The Eastern mission into the XXth century

This century saw the **growth, death and the renewal** of the mission.

- **Before the first world war**

The number of the Assumptionnists increased considerably:

In 1880, they were 23 and by 1914 they were 125

The Oblates were 40 at Father d'ALZON's death and 160 by 1914

This was principally as a result of Fr. Picard's decision to send young French religious to the East from 1882 in order to avoid military service.

A house of formation was opened in Constantinople (Istanbul) on the Asian side of the town : **Phanaraki**.

As for the Oblates, they had been founded to go to the Eastern mission. Even though they had a school in Nîmes since 1873, the aim was to leave for the mission one day or another. Several times a year, a few Oblates left Nîmes for Marseille on their way to the Eastern Mission.

The increase in numbers was also due to the expulsion of the religious congregations from France around 1900.

Missionary posts increased in partnership with the Oblates along the railroad line that was being built through Turkey.

The Balkan wars and the first world war stopped the growth of the Eastern Mission : Turkey and Bulgaria were on Germany's side against France, Italy, England and Russia.

It was quite an uncomfortable situation for everyone!

The Assumption had great influence at a **cultural and oecumenical level**. Fathers and sisters ran colleges, training schools, hospitals, parishes and popular newspapers.

They received Orthodox and Catholics but also Jews, Muslims, Armenians without any problem.

Several Assumptionnists were appointed bishops in the Eastern Mission : Bishop Neveu in Russia - **Petit, Varthalitis, Vutchino** in Greece - **Djoundrine, Stratiev** in Bulgaria, Bishop **Cristea** in Rumania and nowadays **Bishop Pelatre** in Turkey.

In 1895, in Constantinople, on the Asian side of the town, at Kadi Köy, the Assumptionnists created the **Institute for advanced byzantine studies**. This institute was to train a Greek Catholic clergy. It was transferred to Bucharest in 1937 - then to Paris in 1947 (at the onset of communism) and it is now back in Bucharest since 2010.

When we left Turkey, in 1935, a community of Brothers and sisters remained, on this Asian side of Istanbul and are still there today.

Father d'ALZON's ultimate goal for the Eastern mission was Russia : he wrote in 1876 :

“sooner or later, Russia will open its doors to us”.

The Brothers went at the beginning of the XXth century and the Oblates followed, although they didn't stay long. The Assumptionnists remained in Russia through the American Embassy, during the communist period.

Father d'ALZON expected the Oblates to go all over the world. He told them in 1869 :

“the outer border of your mission is the great wall of China”

The very year we left Turkey, in 1935, we went to Congo and Jerusalem, faithful to Father d'ALZON 's wish that we travel as missionaries all over the world.

- **The arrival of Ata Turk in 1922**

In 1922, with the arrival of Ataturk, the secularization of Turkey began and an exodus of Christians started. It was the end of our catholic colleges and no more work could be done either in education or in social activities.

Many Assumptionists and Oblates left Turkey at that time. In France the relationship between the government and the church was better. So, many of the missionaries returned home.

The obligation to leave Turkey (we never really left completely : we stayed in Kadi Köy, as I said before) gave us the opportunity to go to other countries of the Eastern mission : Rumania in 1923 for the Fathers and 1925 for the Oblates. We stayed in Beius in the Greek Catholic church before going elsewhere, especially in Bucharest.

In 1926, the Oblates had 15 communities in the eastern mission (3 were in Armenia).

They had vocations in each country, and postulants went to France for their novitiate.

Brothers and sisters also went to Belgrade in **Yugoslavia** where the Oblates ran a big college from 1925 to 1945.

We must not forget the Lebanon and Greece, although the Oblates didn't follow the Brothers into those countries.

Jerusalem, first at Notre Dame de France, a huge hostel for pilgrims, in front of the New Gate which was pierced for them. The Oblates were there, with the Fathers from 1935 to 1957.

Both congregations are now in saint Peter in Gallicantu, at the cock's crow, in front of Zion Gate. In spite of the tense relations between Jews and the Palestinians, they welcome the pilgrims who have become more and more numerous each year.

- **Arrival of communism in 1948**

Around 1948, communism came to power in Bulgaria, Russia, Yugoslavia, Rumania...all foreigners were obliged to leave the country. The native religious had to make their own choice. Those who were in France could not go back to their own country. The Greek Catholic rite was suppressed and all their properties confiscated to the benefit of the Orthodox. The clergy were obliged to join the Orthodox Church. The Assumptionists joined the Latin rite. The other option was to go underground at the risk of losing freedom.

Several Assumptionists and Oblates were arrested and sentenced to hard labour.

- **The fall of communism in 1990**

The cold war between the soviet block and the west ended, followed by the fall of communism in 1990. The Brothers and the Oblates tried to go back. We extended our work in Rumania thanks to the young women who had joined us clandestinely. We responded to the call of our Assumptionist brothers to assist them in Plovdiv, Moscow and Jerusalem. We tried to help people rebuild in the context of the freedom they now enjoyed and help the church rebuild in a society where the existence of God had been denied for so many years, especially in Bulgaria.

The AA and the OA are engaged in the rebirth of the mission in eastern Europe. As in the past, they wish to offer their services to the local churches to help their renewal after their period “in the catacombs”. Rumania and Bulgaria have experienced a resurrection in the Eastern Catholic church united to Rome - a Church seen by orthodox churches as a major obstacle to unity.

As Benoît GRIERE, Superior general, underlined once again in a leaflet called :

« The passion for Unity »

« Brothers and sisters, let us be united in this challenge of the Eastern Mission. Even if our strength is weak and our fragilities obvious, together we still have a part to play ».

Photos de l'Assomption aujourd'hui dans la Mission d'Orient.