

# ***THE FRENCH AUGUSTINIANS OF THE ASSUMPTION: THEIR QUEENSLAND SAGA, 1860-1875.***

*Fr James Foley*

## ***General Introduction:***

What follows is the first of five proposed papers which, hopefully, will bring to light and life the ill-fated attempts of a French male religious order to establish a community life and a distinctive apostolic mission for itself in the earliest years of the Brisbane diocese. Despite this institutional failure and their personal frustrations, two of these Assumptionist priests made heroic contributions of faithful pastoral care and practical management in two of the significant parishes in the diocese during exceptionally long and stable tenures for that time. Paul Tissot went to Maryborough in mid 1861 as first resident pastor and remained dutifully for fifteen years. Henri Brun went to the large and then faction ridden parish of Ipswich in 1863 and built and battled debt and difficult fellow priests for the next nine years.

This is something of a sad and sorry tale. Yet it also has the dimensions of a stoic saga.

As in the preface to Umberto Ecco's *Name of the Rose*, let it be first explained how a manuscript of a nineteenth century rather than a fourteenth century tragedy of religious life came into my hands:

I used to help at weekends in the Beaudesert parish which included the church at Eagle Heights on Tamborine Mountain. There, after Mass, as was the custom from years past, the priest was given a cup of tea and sandwiches by a Mrs Rose Wilson. This fine old lady was English born, a war bride from the "Great War" who returned with her Australian husband, farmed at Redland Bay first and had then lived for many years on Mount Tamborine. There we chatted after Mass in the sacristy, leaning on the vesting press and sitting on chairs, relics of yet another religious tragedy (Fr Cain's dreams and nightmares at Ashgrove) which had found their way there when the college

evacuated during the Second War.

Rose Wilson mentioned that her brother, James (Austin) Treamer was an Augustinian priest of the Assumption in England, a former provincial of the English Province, archivist and historian, who was working on the story of some priest of his order who had served in Queensland in the early days. I was very interested as, at that stage, I was putting together a necrology for reading at the Seminary liturgy of the clergy who had worked in Queensland. We entered into correspondence. I sent Fr Treamer copies of Anne McLay's *James Quinn*, Denis Martin's *History of Maryborough* and James Duhig's *Souvenir* of the opening of St Mary's, Ipswich, 1904. Meanwhile, his research continued in the Assumptionists' archives in the General House, Rome, and of the North American Province.

May 1988 saw the completion of Fr Treamer's compilation of this invaluable, alternative, independent source of information and observation on the first 15 years of the Brisbane diocese.

To quote Fr Treamer's intentions:

*I do not consider what I have written to be a 'book'. My aim is only to provide useful material to such persons who, hereafter, wish to use the following pages for the purpose they may have in mind. (p.1)*

Copies of Fr Treamer's work are held in the Brisbane Archdiocesan Archives and the library of Banyo Seminary.

My own observations are that this is indeed a great find. The letters presented here are in more or less chronological order. Being usually translations from the French, they are presented in synopsis form and at times summarized or edited and some local Queensland details perhaps have been overlooked. The focus is on the issue: the relations between priests of this religious congregation hoping to have their own foundation and the bishop of the diocese - the mercurial James Quinn.

While Fr Treamer's interest lies in that central issue, a local reader would be fascinated by much of the incidental details about parish life and places. This source - not filtered through Irish eyes and mindsets - gives an impression of early Catholic life somewhat differing from the received folklore of an Irish Church, e.g.,

*On Board the 'Donald Mackay', latitude of Lisbon*

*We are edified by the Faith of these good Irishmen, and we hope to find the same Faith among their countrymen out there.*

*One of the crew was lost at sea, and one person was anointed by Monsignor. Reverend Don Cani (an Italian priest and future bishop) and an Irish priest have started hearing confessions. Father Cusse and Father Tissot are studying English, but there is very little free time.*

*P.E. Tissot" (p.23)*

*1st January, 1861. On board the 'Donald MacKay':*

*Father Cusse will be giving lengthy details of our journey. In spite of the usual upsets at the beginning of our sea journey, my health is good - so we have resumed our spiritual exercises and our study of the English language. The Irish priests are very edifying, and Father Cusse is esteemed by all on board for the qualities you know him to possess. Brother Francisco enjoys perfect health and is kept busy with me, reading and performing his spiritual exercises. I have to remind him of the necessity of good manners, deportment, discretion and prudence. The captain is a perfect gentleman in his dealings with Monsignor Quinn and ourselves - likewise the officers. The Catholic members of the crew join the Irish emigrants for our Sunday services, and we are edified by the way the non-Catholics observe Sunday. Up to now, we have been able to say Mass nearly every day, and when this is impossible, we assist at Monsignor's Mass and receive Holy Communion. Every evening we go with Monsignor to say the Rosary with the Irish emigrants. It is becoming warmer and our cabin is stifling. We still find it difficult to get accustomed to English food: salt meat, highly seasoned stews... and particularly, nothing to drink!*

*Send out more missionaries, and encourage us with your letters.*

*P.E. Tissot" (p.24)*

*A little later, upon arrival, a picture clearly emerges of settled, stable and well structured parish and diocesan life - from the very beginning - even in distant and relatively financially secure Maryborough.*

*To Father d'Alzon. Maryborough - 10th July, 1862.*

*He speaks of a community team, and hopes this will encourage the Brothers.*

*He gives an account of his ministry on Sundays. The usual English and Irish customs and traditional devotions. He reads English quite easily now - nevertheless he is not yet fluent. But he can manage his business affairs.*

*The Blessed Sacrament is now reserved in the chapel. There are about thirty people present every day at his 6.30 a.m. Mass... and he gives other examples of progress. Monsignor authorises him to keep fifty pounds a year, and Brother Francisco ten pounds. Mr Cleary, their host, provides them generously with food - and they do without the little luxuries of town.*

*Father Tissot expects to stay at Maryborough for a long time, as no other priest wishes to come here. In return for his keep, Brother Francisco acts as Mr Cleary's official servant. He looks after the garden and keeps an eye on the Aborigines who work for Mr Cleary. He helps to bring the cattle home - and every evening he recites the Rosary with Mr Cleary's nephew.*

*The number of immigrants increases daily.*

*P.E. Tissot (p.69)*

In the early 1860s in Brisbane there was a surplus rather than a shortage of priests, with six priests living in the old four-roomed *Dara*, the bishop's residence.

At the same time, moneys were collected, taxed, borrowed and spent in huge sums - and these were not always the "pennies of the poor." There was promise of local vocations to the priesthood and religious life. The letters reveal a mobility and relative ease and speed of travel between major centres and an unusual concern for the Aboriginal people, at least on the part of the Assumptionists and Propaganda, even if Quinn was tardy in this regard:

*Maryborough - 9th December, 1867*

*He sends Father d'Alzon a report on the spiritual side of the parish, quoting the Bishop's satisfaction on the occasion of his visitation.*

*Frequent reception of the Sacraments - religious services carried on in a becoming way - sermons (short, as Father Tissot wants to be well understood) - school children well behaved - drunkenness, disorder and vice are common. The priest is greatly respected by everybody. Compared with other parishes, his is a poor one. He has no personal debts, and he was able to obtain for the parish, a Government grant by fencing in land on which*

*"we built a nice presbytery surrounded by a vineyard cared for by Brother Francisco.*

*"And we are more advanced than before, since Monsignor has spoken of work among the aborigines. For the past seven years Propaganda has been asking for it, and now Monsignor wants to take it on."*

*Father Tissot is in favour of this grand and important work, but stated that only Father d'Alzon and the Bishop can come to clear agreement with the hope of sending two more priests and three lay brothers, with definite help from Propaganda and Holy Childhood.*

*P.E.Tissot (pp.133-4)*

There are also numerous, scattered and telling comments about various priests in the diocese. In June he (Brun) had to send a report on the state of the clergy to Bishop Quinn who had recently returned from Europe.

*6th June 1872*

*He has had six assistant priests at short intervals:*

- 1. Father O'Reilly who was recalled to Brisbane and deeply regretted.*
- 2. Father Korecher (German) - rather intemperate in his language.*
- 3. Father Clementine - had greatly improved in his behaviour and ecclesiastical style of life.*
- 4. Father Dunham - "rather a thorn in my side with his accusations."*
- 5. Father Piccinini - rather imprudent.*
- 6. Father McGuinness - really unfit on account of his intemperance.*

*I have the honour of being etc.*

*Henry Brun" (p.146)*

After that gossipy sampling by way of introduction, I propose to make a selection and order this considerable correspondence thus, as an ongoing five part project:

- 1) The Assumptionists - and the Brisbane/Quinn connection, contract and conflict - (The topic of what follows in this paper).
- 2) Cusse - a brief and bitter Brisbane stay.
- 3) Tissot - a long and fruitful ministry in Maryborough.

- 4) Brun - a tough and tragic time in Ipswich.
- 5) Conclusion: unanswered questions re the causes of this tragic conflict.

### ***The Assumptionists: The Brisbane/Quinn connection, contract, conflict.***

The Augustinians of the Assumption are a congregation of religious priests and brothers with simple vows, living under the rule of Augustine and wearing the Augustinian habit.

They were founded by Emmanuel d'Alzon (30/8/1810 - 21/11/1880) the recipient of most of this correspondence. d'Alzon was born of an aristocratic family and was of that era of "Catholic Restoration" after the generation of turbulence following the French Revolution (1789). He trained in Montpellier and Rome and was ordained priest 26/12/1834 and offered his services to the ageing Bishop of Nimes who soon promoted this energetic and aristocratic young cleric to the office of Vicar General.

In 1884 d'Alzon purchased a moribund establishment *College de l'Assumption* in Nimes (where priest Paul Tissot was already teaching) and soon transformed this into one of the finest Catholic secondary schools in southern France.

Feeling a personal call to the religious life, d'Alzon privately bound himself to the three monastic vows in the pre-Revolutionary Augustinian church: *N.D. des Victoires*, Paris, in mid 1845 and started a novitiate for clerical members on Christmas Eve 1845. This novitiate lasted five years for the local bishop was cautious to approve public vows (shades of a theme twenty years later in Brisbane). Brun, Tissot and Cusse were among this first group. Temporary vows were taken at Midnight Mass, 1850 and final vows exactly one year later.

The Assumptionist Congregation was to become the Augustinian expression in France and pursued three special works: the creation of a moral and Catholic trained "elite" in society (p.6), the establishment of a Catholic press and an outreach to the Eastern Rite (a mission to Bulgaria in the then Ottoman Empire was established in 1862, at the same time as the Brisbane mission). In this century Assumptionists have suffered persecution in Eastern European countries and rather interestingly this order has also provided the chaplain to U.S. Catholics in Moscow since 1935.

A pontifical brief of 26 November 1864 encouraged the foundation, but the constitutions were not formally approved till 30 January 1923.

Until his death in 1880, d'Alzon remained General of the Assumptionists, was a spiritual director of note and also continued as Vicar General of the diocese of Nimes and president of *College de l'Assumption* in that same city. He was at Vatican I as theologian to the Bishop of Nimes and there he was a strong advocate of papal infallibility. There he also discussed inconclusively with Quinn the Assumptionist situation in Queensland (pp.136-141).

Here enters James Quinn into the story. In 1850, Quinn founded the "Seminary Academy", *St Laurence O'Toole's* for the sons of the gentry and the middle classes, some of whom were aspiring to the priesthood. This establishment was located at 16-17 Harcourt Street off St Stephen's Green - a most elegant part of Dublin. Quinn continued as Headmaster there till his consecration on 29/6/59 as first Bishop of Brisbane.

In 1856 he had spent six months as Fr d'Alzon's guest at his college in Nimes. These two headmasters shared a similar vision of elite Catholic education (Quinn's name occurs occasionally in the d'Alzon correspondence from the mid 1850s, p.14).

The Assumptionists' second college at Clichy, Paris, founded in 1850 "in spite of its good record... closed in summer 1860... It was not central enough as a 'catchment' area for the wealthier families of Paris. This closure had been discussed for the past two years." (p.14)

So in September 1859 - within three months of his consecration - we find James Quinn at Clichy discussing with the three Assumptionist priests there (Tissot, Brun and Cusse) plans "once the college was closed". (p.14)

There followed fifteen months of protracted and frustrating negotiation (or non-negotiation) between d'Alzon and Quinn. During these months, there were all the symptoms of the troubles to follow:

Father d'Alzon who had foreseen the closure of Clichy, was only too willing to discuss the conditions covering the work of his religious in the new diocese of Brisbane.

Negotiations went on for a year, and at one moment seemed to have ended in failure, because Dr Quinn did not wish to commit himself. In July 1860, Fr d'Alzon wrote to Mother Marie-Eugenie:

*To tell you the truth, I am pleased to withdraw from the situation of dependence we would have found ourselves in. He is not playing the game. I am willing to send religious to Australia, but on conditions less subject to the wishes of this good bishop.*

Father d'Alzon was indeed annoyed, and wrote quite a stiff letter:

*Paris, 23rd August, 1860.*

*My Lord Bishop,*

*Allow me to express my astonishment at the receipt of your letter addressed from Vienna.*

*For the past year, I have had the honour of being in correspondence with you. Having asked for these religious who are now ready to leave for Australia, you are postponing their departure indefinitely - proposing, in addition, that I turn them into diocesan priests to all intents and purposes. What misdemeanour have they committed, having had the honour of awaiting your Lordship's pleasure, to deserve such treatment?*

*If you are still in the same dispositions, I hereby ask you to consider as null any discussions that have taken place.*

*Kindly accept the expression of my respectful sentiments. I remain your Lordship's humble and obedient servant.*

*E. d'Alzon*

Dr Quinn answered from Paris, on 26th September, 1860, with a long letter in Italian, explaining the situation from his point of view. Father d'Alzon wrote again, from Nimes, on 29th September, 1860.

With the removal of the misunderstanding, Father d'Alzon authorised Father Cusse to discuss practical business with His Lordship.

*As your Lordship is without funds, you may take Father Cusse and Father Brun who will then leave for Australia - or only one of them, preferably Father Brun. Once in Brisbane - when these two religious have studied the situation and think we may be of service to you - and when your Lordship thinks fit to provide us with an episcopal document, authorising our presence in the diocese as "the Congregation of the Augustinians of the Assumption" - then we shall gladly send you more men. If Father Cusse or Father Brun prove unsuitable for the Mission, you will send them back, and we shall send you other men instead.*

*(p.15)*

Tissot was as ever more patient and resigned to whatever Providence brought  
20/6/60. (p.16)



Brun grew impatient and began to negotiate on his own behalf to join the Benedictine Bishop Serra in W.A. "a holy religious experienced in the Mission field 13/6/60. (p.17)

Cusse spoke to Quinn about his (delicate) health "not wishing to deceive the Bishop in any way." April 1860 (pp.18-19)

Finally, on 19th November d'Alzon and Quinn signed at Nimes a contract, highly favourable to Quinn, which seems a strange "sell out" of the Assumptionists.

So, before the first three missionaries (Fathers Tissot and Cusse and Brother Gavette) left for Australia, but with the details undisclosed to them, Father d'Alzon signed a contract, to be valid for ten years, on the understanding that a canonically approved residence, of which his religious would be the proprietors, was eventually to be established.

*Conditions agreed upon between Monsignor Quinn, Bishop of Brisbane and the Very Reverend Father d'Alzon, Superior General of the Religious of the Assumption, at Nimes on 19th November 1860.*

*AP 18 - d' A., T.D. 40, pp. 140-141.*

- 1. The Assumptionist religious will go to Brisbane under the same conditions as any other missionaries - and there follow the rule of life fixed by His Lordship the Bishop.*
- 2. For the first ten years the Bishop will be their Superior - but they will always enjoy freedom of correspondence with their Superiors in Europe.*
- 3. The Assumptionists will carefully select suitable subjects - men who intend spending the rest of their lives in the Brisbane Diocese. They will be recalled to Europe if the Bishop so requests. If the Bishop does not request their withdrawal, they may be recalled - but only in the interests of the diocese, and after consulting the Bishop.*
- 4. As soon as His Lordship the Bishop can, he will provide them with a canonically established residence which they themselves will own. Thenceforth Canon Law will be applied, such as regulates the status of Religious Orders in missionary territory.*

*Nimes - 19th November 1860.*

*signed: E.d'Alzon, Superior General of the Religious of the Assumption, and James Quinn, Bishop of Brisbane. (pp.20-21)*

So officially began the Assumptionist Queensland saga: Fifteen years of hard work and heartbreak, during which one priest, Cusse, after thirteen miserable months in Brisbane (10/6/61 - 10/6/62), left the diocese in disgust (one of twenty-three priests to leave in Quinn's first ten years) and spent his remaining four years as pastor of Newcastle, N.S.W. One lay brother was to abandon his religious life for the Gympie diggings. Brun in Ipswich was brought close to bankruptcy and ecclesiastical suspension. Tissot in Maryborough was to work faithfully and fruitfully in the parish but was ever frustrated in his desire for a religious community life. In all this a number of local postulants and (p.138) potential vocations were lost to the congregation.

This stoic but sorry story concluded officially with the decision by the Assumptionists' General Chapter on 18th September, 1873, that the "Mission in Australia... not be officially suppressed... only temporarily abandoned." (p.152)

The Assumptionists' presence in Queensland actually came to an end with the departure of the seventy-five year old "Dean" (from 1869 p.138) Paul Tissot from Brisbane in August 1875. On the eve of his departure, he penned his final two letters home to Fr d'Alzon. The first was financial and factual, yet telling:

*... a sum of two hundred and twenty-four pounds and four shillings from the sale of the land I had bought from Mr J. Cleary and which he bought back has been placed in your name at the Australian Joint Stock Bank, Maryborough - and payable on 8th July, 1877, by the manager of the same bank, Mr Henry McDermott, who gave me a covering letter.*

(p.166)

The land in question was to have been the site of an Assumptionist foundation.

The other letter was far more reflective and poignant, reminiscent of that final scene of failure in the film 'The Mission' -

*The events concerning our Congregation which have happened for more than fourteen years give me plenty to think about. I notice that God's plans may be thwarted and delayed but not destroyed by the action of one man. We leave Queensland without having been able to organize the first Assumptionist community - but we leave behind us memories which will open the way to other Orders in more fortunate times.*

(p.166)

That "one man" was James Quinn: of whom Fr General d'Alzon had curtly concluded after ten years' tension:

*Never will I treat with this man again. (p.155)*

What may we conclude about James Quinn from all this? He did keep to the letter of the original contract (pp.20-21 & 155). Yet the spirit was seemingly callously neglected.

The relations between colonial bishops and religious congregations in the nineteenth century were far from easy and harmonious: Pompallier with the Marists in New Zealand; Polding with the Passionists, Christian Brothers and Charity Sisters in Sydney; Quinn with the Mercy and Josephite Sisters in Brisbane.

How is this constant phenomenon of discord to be appreciated?

I suggest an historian of canon law could shed some light upon this. In those days - long before the 1917 Code of Canon Law - how did newly founded apostolic religious congregations stand with local bishops? Such apostolic congregations were then quite a new manifestation of religious life. Irish bishops, who were only a generation out of the pastoral and political constraints of the Penal Times, were historically and temperamentally ill-prepared and ill-suited to deal easily with such new and potentially independent forces in "Their" dioceses. Could a contemporary parallel be drawn from the relationship between local bishops and new expressions of religious life such as *Opus Dei*?

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