



Fra Donatus Forkan
Priore Generale

Rome, Friday, August 01 2008
Prot No PG103/2008

To the whole Order

My dear Brothers and Co-workers,

1. An update.

Before the summer break here in Rome I want to bring you up-to-date on some of the activities of the General Curia over the past few months. Some of you will know that this year is devoted to conducting the Canonical General Visitation in some of the Provinces of the Order. The remaining Provinces will have their Visitations following the celebration of the next Provincial Chapters. The entire General Definitory, with the exception of Br. Robert who, in addition to being a General Councillor, is also Provincial of the Province of St. Augustine, Africa, were involved in conducting the Visitations of the past several months.

- A new way of concluding the Visitation.

The new format or way of concluding the Visitation is that the Visitor, having completed the Visit to the Province in the usual way, does not in fact conclude the Visit **in** the Province. However, the Visitor holds a meeting with the Provincial and Council and, in some cases, a Provincial Assembly where he gives an overview of the situation in the Province as he sees it, having spent a prolonged period of time in the Province. During the Visit he would have met with the Brothers individually and also have had community meetings, visited all of the centres and services, greeted some of the service users, met with the significant leaders in the services and important committees in the life of the centres or the Province. The Visitor also pays a courtesy visit to the leaders of the local church and sometimes civic leaders who would have a particular relationship with the centre or service.

The conclusion of the Visitation takes place at the General Curia in Rome for the European Provinces, or at the conclusion of the Regional Conferences for those of the other continents. The Provincial and Council of each Province where the Visitation has taken place will meet with the General Definitory. The Brother who carried out the Visitation to the Province will present his report. Following on this there will be open discussion on the state of the Province in general with particular focus on the challenges, difficulties and opportunities that the Province or an individual house may be encountering. To assist the Provincial and Council in governing and animating the Province, the Visitor may have formulated a number of recommendations. These too will be discussed and amplified, or indeed added to, in the light of the conversations that take place.

This new approach we consider to be more appropriate to our times and respectful of the authority and responsibility of those who govern the Order and the individual Provinces. The two Definitories coming together at this level provides an opportunity for the General and Provincial Definitories to be more aware of the reality within the Province or Delegation. In a collegial way it also provides the opportunity to have conversations around issues, concerns and the opportunities for mission that exist and how these might be responded to, not just in the Province, but at a regional and Order wide level. This type of encounter also promotes the idea of greater accountability, mutual understanding, communion, cooperation and collegiality.

As you can imagine, conducting a Visitation in a Province is a time consuming exercise and, depending on the size of the Province, it can also be tiring. However, it is a wonderful experience and, as a Visitor, one gets to know the Province, the Brothers and the Co-workers. What makes the conducting of the Visitation a pleasant experience is the very warm welcome and total availability and cooperation of everybody in the Province. This is also a true expression of hospitality, for which we are sincerely grateful and deeply humbled.

- The reality in which we live and minister.

Because we are a human institution, in every Province there are challenges and difficulties. These may arise from financial constraints, education for life and formation of Brothers and Co-workers. But usually what one hears is a sigh like that of St. John of God himself, at not being able to do more for people who are suffering. Jesus said that the poor will always be with us, so like-wise the numbers of people who suffer deep pain, not just because of their illness which, in a sense, they could bear, but the pain of being rejected because of the nature of their illness or disability. There are the new poor in the inner cities, migrants, the elderly and refugees all crying out for help. One also can observe the progress that is taking place in terms of the quality of services being provided to the sick or needy person.

The judicious use of modern technology and scientific developments in many situations makes this possible. In this regard I would like to state that the integrity of the mission of the Order requires that *all* the members of the ‘Family of St. John of God’ understand and uphold the Order’s mission, its ethos, its philosophy and values.

As stated in the Charter of Hospitality, “Today, our task as Brothers and Co-workers is to be prophets of hope, prophets of the dignity of those who suffer, prophets of love which is often snuffed out by technology and by the laws of the market, which have penetrated the world of healthcare.” (Chapter 8: 8.1) Just because something is technically possible does not necessarily mean that it is morally permissible. Our firm belief in, and recognition of, the innate dignity of each human being and the sacredness of the person must move us at all times and in all circumstances to uphold and defend human life from conception to natural death.

- The attraction of and influence of St. John of God.

Another aspect of the Visitation, the most important actually, is to see the fidelity and commitment to the mission of the Brothers and Co-workers. The figure of John of God has a huge attraction and fascination for people today who are inspired by his life, philosophy and the values that he enunciated. This has led to exciting new ways of expressing hospitality. To illustrate this point I wish to recount two experiences that I had recently when visiting our houses.

❖ Creativity and imagination in expressing hospitality.

The first is in New Jersey in the U.S. where the St. John of God Community Services provide assistance and support for more than 1,000 families who have a family member that has a learning or developmental disability. The Co-workers who work at a branch of this vast service, about 50 kilometres from the main centre, came up with a unique way of helping such families in a truly hospitaller fashion. We all know the pain, the feelings of guilt, the sense of helplessness and bewilderment of a family when they have a child with a disability. When the parents, the mother in particular, has to bring their child to a ‘special care centre’ they come with feelings of inadequacy and with a sense of failure as parents. They have to come to strangers to help them care for, and raise, their own baby. The Co-workers at the O’Shea Centre instead of having the mother come to the centre and adding to the stress and frustration she already has, go to the home to work with the mother and the family.

This approach has many positive effects: the mother is affirmed in what she is doing for her baby, the child and mother stay in familiar surroundings and use what means can be made available to them in the home to help the child. The Co-workers, who are all professionals, gently advise, affirm and support the mother. If, or when, it is necessary for the mother to bring her child to the centre for some particular therapy or assistance she meets familiar faces of friends who are there to help her and her baby. The O’Shea centre provides services to more than 500 families, many of whom live in very poor conditions and are not able to speak English very well. So, an interpreter is a member of the team that visits the home. This Centre is named after the late Br. Damien O’Shea who was the founder of the St. John of God Community Services, New Jersey, and the one who initiated more than 40 years ago its first early intervention programme for babies born with a learning disability.

- ❖ A sense of pride in the special character of the service.

The second example is from the other side of the world – New Zealand to be precise. Many years ago the Australasian Province began a work for young people in difficulty in the city of Christchurch. The service is called St. John of God Waipuna Youth & Community Services. It is a social service agency providing young people (aged 14-25), and fathers and mothers under 25, and their families with support and opportunities. The word ‘**Waipuna**’ is made up of two words of the Maori language, "wai," **meaning** water, and "puna," **meaning** clear spring. The St. John of God Waipuna Youth & Community Services provides a social service agency for young people, and their families, with support and opportunities for change.

In the ‘Mission Statement’ of the Centre it states: “We take pride in the special character of our agency, which is based on the key values of hospitality and compassion. We believe in the value and uniqueness of each person who engages with our services.”

When I visited the Centre during the Visitation that I conducted recently of the Province, I met with the staff, about 30 young professionals in all. It was wonderful to hear the respect and genuine concern these young staff had for the young people they were accompanying at a decisive time in their lives.

Many of the young people come from dysfunctional homes and have to live by their wits, some of them on the streets. Because of their background these young people are open to be used, abused and manipulated by unscrupulous adults. The staff at St. John of God Waipuna Youth & Community Services are very professional in their work, which they do with great generosity, commitment and enthusiasm. It was inspiring to see three young staff members arranging a ‘week of adventure’ for a group of these young people. Wonder, excitement and adventure is a normal experience for young children and young adults. However many of the young people who come to the St. John of God Waipuna Youth & Community Services, because of their background, have been deprived of their childhood and all that that entails, things we normally take for granted. At St. John of God Waipuna situations are created that help the young people to claim some of what they have missed out on in life during their formative years. As well as getting professional help by way of counselling and other appropriate forms of assistance to meet their needs, they are taken on outings and other recreational activities.

I came across an example of this when I dropped by the office of some social workers and community care workers at St. John of God Waipuna Youth & Community Services who were planning an outing for a group of six young people. They were going to the snow covered mountains some distance from Christchurch on an excursion that would require careful preparation, planning and other logistic considerations. For the young people it would be a week of adventure, fun and working together with others. For them the outing would require accepting personal responsibility, sharing with others and being dependent on each other. Working as a member of team would develop a sense of belonging to the group and the importance of respecting the dignity and rights of each one. A successful field trip, such as the one being planned, contributes to instilling a sense of pride, achievement and

self esteem in the young person. Overall this is a great program and a beautiful expression of hospitality, oftentimes replacing hostility and anger in the life of the young person, with a sense of pride, self-esteem and personal worth.

2. The great scandal of our time.

We are all very concerned with the price of energy and how it is going to effect us now and in the future. This is a justifiable concern, but let us not forget that there are millions of people who don't know when they will have their next meal. The great scandal of our time is the price of food. The Church is deeply concerned about this because it is unnecessary and causes unimaginable suffering for millions of poor people who are already at the verge of starvation. Our Holy Father, Benedict XVI, said of this situation to the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), "hunger and malnutrition are unacceptable in a world which has, in fact, levels of production, resources and knowledge sufficient to put an end to such tragedies and their consequences." The Holy Father continued, "purely technical and economic considerations must not prevail over the duties of justice toward people suffering from hunger." Because, of the 51 countries where the Order has a presence, 30 are in the developing world, the challenge of hunger and want for the vast numbers of poor people whom they are trying to help is something our Brothers and Co-workers face every day. What use is medicine to a patient when the stomach is empty? In the West the doctor or pharmacist makes sure to instruct the client to take the medicine after his or her meal, but if you have no meal and no immediate hope of getting one, what then? Benedict XVI warned: "The Church does not only pray 'give us this day our daily bread,' but, following the Lord's example, works in every way 'to multiply the five loaves and two fish' with countless humanitarian efforts and sharing so that no one remains without the necessities of life." We are very proud of, and indeed humbled by, the great work that our sisters and brothers in hospitality are doing for so many poor and suffering people in the developing countries in particular. Likewise we are deeply grateful to our benefactors who make it possible for them to give 'not just daily bread' but medicines the will cure their illness, and other forms of assistance that will give them hope. Let us not forget the cry of the poor at a time of great expenditure for holidays and other forms of entertainment.

3. Meeting of Commissions.

The various International Commissions here at the General Curia have had several meetings. The Commission for the Revision of the General Statutes, for example, has completed a draft of its work that will be presented by the Commission Chairperson, Br. Jesus Etayo, at the Regional Conferences from September onwards.

Br. Jesus Etayo presided over a meeting of all those who work in formation in the Province of St. Augustine, Africa. It was a very constructive meeting and the same type of meeting will also be held in America. We have more than 40 Scholastics in Africa so we are in the process of seeking suitable premises to rent, at first, in Nairobi, Kenya, where there are ample opportunities for our young Brothers to pursue studies.

Formation, both initial and ongoing, must be a priority because without formation there can be no authentic growth in mission and ministry. Without formation there can be no renewal and without renewal we can expect apathy – a lukewarm living of the religious life – and stagnation to very quickly set in.

4. Regional Conferences.

Starting with the European Conference on 1 September at Los Molinos, Spain, the Regional Conferences will commence and continue over a three month period until the middle of November. The 2006 General Chapter endorsed and resolved that Regional Conferences and other forms of cooperation and networking are most important for the animation and advancement of the Order's mission in the world of today. I ask for your prayers for the success of these Conferences.

5. Conclusion.

In conclusion, to those Brothers and Co-workers who will be taking their annual holidays, mainly in Europe and the U.S. where it is summer, I wish you a restful and enjoyable time. Here at the General Curia we join the 'exodus' from Rome during the month of August, and take our holidays too! There will be someone here in the community always to receive enquires. This Brother will have the contact number of the General Secretary, Br. Jose Maria Chavarri, for any urgent matter that may require attention.

Fraternally yours in St. John of God.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Donatus Forkan O.H.", written in a cursive style.

Br. Donatus Forkan, O.H.
Prior General.