



Fra Donatus Forkan
Priore Generale

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**TO THE WHOLE ORDER, MEMBERS OF THE
SAINT JOHN OF GOD FAMILY**

My dear brothers and sisters in Hospitality,

Preamble

In this Circular Letter I wish, in the first instance, to greet all the members of the Family of Saint John of God and in his name to affirm and thank you for the work that you do each day at the service of our brothers and sisters who come to our centres or otherwise avail of our services at a time of particular need in their lives. Secondly, I wish to share with you some of what transpired at the recent Assembly of Major Superiors of the Order that took place in Rome in September of this year.

Assembly of Major Superiors

Having concluded the Provincial Chapters earlier this year all of the Provincials, a Vice-Provincial, a General Delegate and a representative number of Provincial Delegates were invited to Rome to participate in a week-long meeting (13-17 September) with the General Government of the Order for sharing and reflection. In all, 11 new Provincials and one Vice-Provincial were elected at their respective Chapters. There were 10 Provincials who were re-elected and one General Delegate who was appointed together with a number of Provincial Delegates nominated in Provinces where Delegations exist. There was a real sense of fraternity, collegiality with a genuine resolve to work together to ensure the continuance of John-of-God-Hospitality with the recognition that the renewal of the Order was the only way to ensure that, in fact, this would be the case.

The Assembly of the Major Superiors of the Order was organised in accordance with Art. 121 of the General Statutes that states: “*The Assembly of Major Superiors takes place at least at the end of all the Provincial Chapters of the Order with the purpose of planning and coordinating in a collegial way the activities of the Provinces and the Order.*” Furthermore, the Assembly of Major Superiors gave concrete expression to the concept of collegiality.

Significance of the Assembly

In my opening address to the Assembly I drew attention, among other matters, to the fact that the meeting was of particular significance for several reasons. It was the first such meeting since the celebration of the Provincial Chapters and the approval of the revised General Statutes by the Extraordinary General Chapter held in Guadalajara, Mexico, in 2009. The meeting took place at a time of unprecedented and rapid change in a world without frontiers, in a world that is experiencing a global financial crisis that has given rise to unemployment and a drop in the living standards of many families throughout the world. In addition the Church itself is exposed to influences from outside but also acknowledges that the greatest threat to its credibility comes, not from outside, but “from the sin within”¹ In addition to these the Order also faces many other internal challenges on several fronts.

Signs of hope in the midst of doubt

Commentators and Religious themselves write and speak about the profound crisis that religious life is experiencing. This situation, which is far from easy, as well as giving rise to many challenges that need to be confronted also provides real opportunities for renewal. A renewal that will shape the way Religious live and minister long into the future. The type of ministry and the role of the Religious in that ministry will need to be redefined. For sure it is not an easy time to be a Religious because of the uncertainty. I believe that uncertainty will be part of the life of Religious for many years to come. This state of affairs is not anything new. One has only to think of Saint Thomas. Thomas refused to believe the other Apostles when they told him that they had seen the Lord. His response was *unless I see his hands and put my fingers into the holes made by the nails and put my hands into his side, I refuse to believe.*² Yet it was Thomas who, having met the risen Lord, was the first to confess the Divinity of Christ with the words, “My Lord and my God”. There is no shortage of doubters in our time – or sceptics and prophets of doom as Pope John XXIII referred to them – yet it is at times like this that charismatic leaders arose in the Church, like Good Pope John XXIII himself, Saint John of God, Benedict Menni and so on: people, women and men of faith, who led the People of God

¹ May 11 ,Pope Benedict XVI to journalists on the airplane to Portugal.

² John 20:28

to a deeper understand of their own faith and a return to the practice of traditional evangelical values.

Renewal is not optional extra

At the meeting of the Provincials each participant gave a short report of the state of his Province e.g. the challenges, opportunities and difficulties that exist in the Province. Given the times we are living through we can imagine in general what some of these challenges might be. What was surprising was that all of the Provincials underlined the fact that, despite the difficulties that they face, the work of John of God continues to grow and develop in terms of the scope and quality of the services that are being provided for poor, sick and needy people.

In my view this is a clear sign of the direction in which the Holy Spirit is leading and guiding our Order. Despite the continued decline in the professed membership of the Order there is a steady growth in the mission of Hospitality that is sustained mostly by committed Co-workers. This is the work of the Spirit and it requires all of us, in particular those who have the responsibility of leading, guiding and animating the life of the Province i.e. the Provincial and his Council and others with leadership responsibility, to reflect deeply on what is happening in order to plan and shape the future of the mission. To bring about the necessary changes and the updating and renewal of our lives as Religious at a deep level it is necessary to pray and allow ourselves to be led by the Holy Spirit and engage in conversations with, and listen to, the Co-workers and read the signs of the times. Renewal is not an optional extra but the way in which John-of-God-Hospitality will be secured and given shape for a future that will be very different from our past. This is exciting but also challenging as it will demand appropriate structures to support the mission. It will also involve applying a lot of energy to formation i.e. Schools of Hospitality. In a word, new wine-skins for the new wine that is the evolution of the Order as a Family - *The Family of Saint John of God* – and its mission.

It was evident from our discussions during the Assembly that all are committed to renewal, but not all understand it in the same way. This is why it might be important to have outside facilitation i.e. a well prepared and experienced Religious to work with a Brother appointed by the Provincial and Council to guide the renewal process in the Province. It is an accepted fact that in terms of renewal not all the Provinces can, or are expected to, move at the same pace or with the same intensity. While accepting this fact, it is very important however that all are moving in the same direction, with the same vision, guided by the teachings of the Second Vatican Council and subsequent theological insights, the orientation and guidance given by successive Priors General and Chapters which are the highest authority of the Order, motivated and guided by our *Polar Star* that is **John of God**.

It cannot be business as usual

In the informal exchanges by the participants at the Assembly, the feedback from the groups – that met, variously, on the basis of language or regions – the provocative and challenging presentations by guest speakers and others, made it abundantly clear that our future cannot be *business as usual*. There is an urgent need for new imaginative thinking to allow for the expansion, refinement, development and the new expressions of Hospitality *that is Co-worker sustained and lead*. The Holy Father, Benedict XVI, in his Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, clearly states that the works or ministry of charity, which are mostly carried out by lay people, form part of the fundamental structure of the Church. Pope Benedict also has stated that lay people are *co-responsible*³ with the clergy for evangelisation. Being *co-responsible* describes very accurately the relationship that should exist between the Brother and Co-worker as they both share responsibility for the mission. The 2006 General Chapter stated that the Brothers and Co-workers *are united in the mission and Charism*⁴. Now we can use the expression *being co-responsible* for the mission entrusted to us. Together we enable the Order to fulfil its mission *of assisting the sick and those in need, with a preference of the poorest. In this way to show that the compassionate and merciful Christ of the Gospel is still alive among people and we work with him for their salvation*⁵. Our openness to the Spirit, to the signs of the times and to the needs of people will enable us to see how we are to incarnate Hospitality creatively in any given time or situation. (cf. Cons. 6b) Perhaps more than at any time in recent history the present situation calls for a faith response. It demands an imaginative and creative response to the new situation that is evolving as a result of the process of renewal that the Order has engaged in over the past 45 years or so. The urgency of the mission and evangelisation today, the changed situation in society, the enormous technological and scientific developments that have taken place and are ongoing are things to which we must respond at a deep level in accordance with the spirit and manner of Saint John of God if we are to be true to our mission and the mandate that has been given to us.

The reality is that there are about 52,500 men and women who daily continue the work of Saint John of God in the 53 countries in which the Order has a presence and in which 706 *Brothers* are in active ministry. This does not take into account the tens of thousands of volunteers and benefactors who actively support the mission. The other half of the professed membership is either in formation or is no longer active in ministry because of illness or disabilities associated with the ageing process. In terms of giving a living witness however, which is at the heart of the Gospel and our vocation as religious brothers, our senior Brothers are a reminder of what is of real importance in life.

³ March 07, 2010

⁴ GC Declarations, C

⁵ Constitutions Chapter 1: 5

Having spent a life time of active service in the manner of Martha, they now have more time to spend with the Lord like Mary⁶, while at the same time continuing to serve by visiting the sick and taking on the role of Barnabas – son of encouragement, they encourage and mentor the younger Brothers and Co-workers etc. according to their capacity. Our senior Brothers remind us that our value as followers of Jesus lies in the witness we bear and not what we do unless we also bear witness. (cf. Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 21).

Some other topical items discussed

There were many important topics discussed during the Assembly of Provincials which I cannot comment on here as it would unduly prolong a letter that is already long enough! Before concluding however, there are two relevant topics that received considerable attention from the participants. They were *The Year of the Family of Saint John of God* and *The General Chapter 2012*.

The Year of the Family of Saint John of God (8 March, 2011 - 8 March, 2012) was considered to be an important opportunity to promote our way of life as Brothers in the Church and to endorse and to give concrete expression to the concept of *The Family of Saint John of God*. Following the Provincials' Assembly the General Definitory agreed that the regional conferences will be an important element in the celebration of the *Year of The Saint John of God Family*. Therefore they should begin with a period of reflection, perhaps the first two days, on the renewal process since Vatican II and how it has shaped the way we live today; the way we have come to understand, live and express the Charism of Hospitality that we have received from Saint John of God. It was further agreed that the regional conferences would need to look towards the future, say the next ten years, and try to foresee or predict what the Order will look like throughout the region at that time. Furthermore, instead of just passively waiting for, and then responding to, change as it happens, to come up with some ideas and suggestions on how to manage change and shape the future together. In other words, instead of being reactors to an evolving situation, to be proactive in shaping our own destiny – in so far as this is possible. Creative and imaginative ideas and suggestions will surely arise on how to build on what has been accomplished in the past, to consolidate the present and to shape the future.

The General Chapter 2012 was also considered by all as a crucial event that will need to give clear direction in terms mission, ministry and shared responsibility for the Charism of Hospitality. As you know the Chapter will be celebrated in Portugal, Fatima, from 22 *October to 9 November, 2012*. It will be the first time that a General Chapter has been held in the land of John of God's birth. John's first visit to his homeland after he left or was taken away when he was just eight years old, filled him with a great sadness when he discovered that he had lost all of his family save an aged uncle.

This time however, John will be accompanied by his new family. This is something to celebrate, to give thanks for and to plan together the future direction that John would wish his Family to take in order to be faithful to the mission and Charism that he received from God and has bequeathed to us his followers.

When it comes to discussing, deciding upon and shaping the future of the mission of the Order a forum needs to be found at which the Co-workers' voices, ideas, vision, experiences and professional expertise are heard. The 'new' Order that I see evolving will need to have as its foundation inclusion, pluralism and international and multicultural dimensions. Likewise when it comes to discussing the mission of the Order it is becoming increasingly more important that those who are co-responsible with the Brothers for the Charism of Hospitality i.e. senior Co-workers, are actively involved in the preparation of, and participation at, gatherings where these issues are discussed and decisions taken even at an international level. The Chapter will need to look at appropriate, and if considered necessary, new canonical structures that will guarantee the Charism of Hospitality into the future.

The General Definitory will shortly setup an international Commission to prepare for the General Chapter and define its terms of reference that will take into account what was discussed at the Provincials' Assembly and the regional conferences with regard to the above matters and other relevant issues.

Conclusion

I believe that the Provincials' Assembly, which of course included the Vice-Provincial of the newly formed Vice-Province of Saint Richard Pampuri, the General Delegate from Canada and a representative number of Provincial Delegates and other invitees, was a very useful meeting. It provided the opportunity for the leadership of the Order to take a fresh look at where we are today as an Order in the Church, to whom our mission is directed and by whom it is being accomplished.

As the map of the Order continues to change, it is the privilege and responsibility of all according to their position to manage the change and shape the future in such a way that the mission of the Order will be secured for the benefit of future generations of sick and needy people. As we are now living in the so-called 'global village', a globalised world, a world without frontiers, it is essential for us as a world-wide organisation to cooperate across country, province and even continental borders. The collegial dimension of our ministry of service was emphasised and the need to cooperate at a regional level was considered of eminent importance.

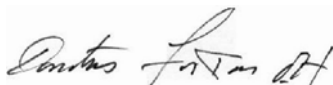
Finally, on a very personal note, I wish to thank most sincerely all who sent me good wishes and offered prayers for me on the occasion of my celebration of the Golden Jubilee of my Religious Profession as a Brother of Saint John of God.

I was really overwhelmed by the kindness and goodness of so many people who contributed to making this a unique event in my life. I have tried to respond to each one personally, if I have missed out on acknowledging and thanking anyone I am sorry, it was not intentional. As a token of my appreciation the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass has been offered up for the intentions of all who endeavoured by whatever way to make this a special occasion for me. The contributions to the so called, 'Jubilee Fund', amounted to about €80,000 and will be divided between the three houses indicated in Br. Rudolf's communication related to the Jubilee Celebrations earlier in the year. Thank you very much indeed.

My final words are ones of encouragement to trust in God and rely on the guidance of his Spirit. We can then look to the times ahead with hope and anticipation of a bright future for our Order. Wonderful things are happening across the Order with a daily increase in the number of people being served and supported in the way shown us by John of God. Something new is emerging, a *new face* – I would go so far as to say a *new Order* is evolving, being born! God is creating "a new thing among us" (Is. 43:19) Let us not be afraid therefore (cf. Mt. 28:10). There are many signs that the Spirit is active among us and the direction in which he is leading us.

Let us place all our troubles, concerns and the future of our beloved Family in the hands of Our Blessed Lady, Mother of Good Council, and constantly seek the intercession of Saint John of God and our Hospitaller Saints and Blessed Brothers.

Fraternally yours

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Donatus Forkan OH'.

Brother Donatus Forkan OH
Prior General