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Priore Generale

TO THE WHOLE ORDER

**“Blessed are Those Who Bring Good News.”
(Isaiah: 7-10)**

Rome, 18 October 2009
ref: PG107/2009

My dear brothers and sisters in hospitality,

Preamble

On this occasion I would like to share with you some thoughts on two themes that are both relevant and topical at this time, at least in the Church and the Order. The first is that of *missions (Ad Gentes – to the people)* from the perspective of the Order or Family of St. John of God. The second topic is connected to the first, in terms of fidelity to his hospitaller calling, by Br. Eustace Kugler under extraordinarily difficult circumstances.

Mission Ad Gentes

As you know every year, in October, the Church celebrates and promotes missionary work. Those of us who make up the Family of St John of God see this as an opportunity to reflect on this matter, and above all on the great missionary drive that has characterised our Order, particularly since the Second Vatican Council, as the fruit of the Charism of Hospitality that we have received from our Divine Lord.

The specific imperative which we have been given by the vow of Hospitality is not to provide care merely for the sick and needy people around us, but also to reach out to look for those in need, even in distant lands, and at all times according to the spirit of St John of God. For Hospitality, borders do not exist.

Following the death of our Founder, the Brothers went out to Latin America, Africa, Asia as well as across Europe. In the wake of the Second World War, Br. Mosé Bonardi, the then Prior General, wished to give the Order a fresh missionary drive. The results are before our eyes: we are present in 52 countries throughout the world,

and more than 30 of these are in the so called *developing countries*. So many of our Brothers have volunteered to go to these countries to bring the Good News to the local people by offering them practical assistance and caring for those in need. Many of these Brothers have now left this earthly life, but many others are continuing to pursue their missionary endeavours back in their original Provinces in Europe, others are still working in Africa, Asia or Latin America.

On behalf of the whole Order I would like to acknowledge and thank these Brothers for having taken the Good News through the Charism of Hospitality to the countries in which the Order is now present. And while thanking them, I would also like to say that, in the words of Saint Teresa, they are at the heart of the Church, to which I would add that they are also at the heart of our Order. Through your continued prayers for the missions, your work back in your Province of origin - some Brothers working at fundraising or creating awareness of the needs of the missions, others by patiently bearing the sufferings associated with the ageing process and failing health - *all* continue to be missionary and to give witness to what is fundamental to the following of Christ as a religious and as a missionary.

The missionary work continues

The missionary work undertaken in the past is by no means finished. On the contrary it will continue until the end of time. So long as there are people who have never heard the Good News, the name of Jesus Christ or His message of salvation, his followers will continue to go to other places, to other peoples to share with them the hope that is in their hearts (1 Peter 3: 15-16) that comes from knowing the love Christ. (Eph: 3:19). The words of Pope Benedict XVI in his message for this year's World Mission Sunday sums up the motivation for the missionary activity of the Church, and the Order, what it is and what it is not: "*The Church works not to extend power or affirm dominion, but to carry to all, Christ, the Salvation of the world. We ask nothing except to put ourselves at the service of all humanity, especially the suffering and the excluded.*" Putting ourselves at the service of all, especially the suffering and the excluded is the full expression of John-of-God hospitality. As in so many other aspects of the life of the Order, here too a change, a development, is taking place; what I call the *intercontinental missionary activity of the Order*. This is happening in Africa, Latin America and Asia. For some Provinces in these continents it is understood and accepted that Brothers will spend some period of time in another country. It may be within one's own Province or it may be in another Province of the Order, or even in another continent. This welcome development is to be encouraged and supported.

The readiness of Brothers to be present in any situation in which any sick or needy person requires us, not only applies to going out to what are known as mission lands, but to go to any situation in which the Order is present. The Brother, because of his consecration in hospitality, *is willing and free to leave everything and to go and proclaim the Gospel even to the ends of the earth*. (EN 69) He does this through the witness of his life and by living and exercising hospitality in the way and spirit of St. John of God. We know from experience that this is a most effective tool of evangelisation, for it is evangelisation.

We have so many resources and means at our disposal today to take the Good News to parts of the world that used to be completely cut off. What used to seem impossible to achieve has become absolutely possible today. The Hospitality of St John of God must not, however, be considered merely as a means of evangelisation, for it constitutes evangelisation itself, which is why we have to strive to share the Charism with as many people as possible.

We share the reason for our hope

The Church, and therefore our Order, is missionary by its very nature. We can, and therefore we must, pass on to our Co-workers the same missionary drive that has always characterised our Order.

The missionary spirit is the reason why we must share our faith, as I stated above, it is also the hope that we bear within us, which comes from the certainty of 'knowing Jesus'. This hope is more urgently necessary today than ever before; the world presents us with so many tragedies, so many people marginalised because of their ideas or by sickness and disabilities. These are people who are still awaiting the Good News and we, through the Hospitality that we offer, can share with them our hope and our faith and in doing so give them the possibility to face the future with hope.

In addition to our Brothers who, in the past and still today, have gone out and continue to go to the developing countries, there are many co-workers who have volunteered to spend time in the same places with them, making a tangible contribution through their work on behalf of the local people. I recently met a doctor who is working as a volunteer in Africa, who thanked me because this had given him an opportunity to discover his full humanity.

This is a crucial element: we must never lose our humanity in this world which often seems to be totally dehumanised. Our task, as Brothers, is to give an impetus, to encourage our Co-workers to make their own specific contribution in the missionary field by fundraising or voluntary service.

Month of October dedicated to the Missions

This month of October – Missions' Month – provides us with an opportunity to rediscover the missionary dimension of hospitality in relation to others, particularly those who are less fortunate than ourselves.

I should like to thank wholeheartedly all those who, in one way or another, have collaborated on behalf of our missions and are continuing to do so, even at the cost of great personal sacrifice.

Let us entrust our missions to Saint Teresa of the Child Jesus, St Francis Xavier, the Patrons of the missions, and to St John of God and to our new Blessed, Br. Eustace Kugler, so that through the gift of the Charism of Hospitality we may succeed in

restoring hope for a better life to all those who live in dire poverty and marginalisation in countries which, while being far away from us geographically, are close to us because we always bear them in our hearts, in our thoughts and in our prayers.

Beatification of Blessed Eustace Kugler. (January 15th. 1867 – June 10th. 1946)

I would now like to share with you some thoughts and emotions that stay with me following my participation at the Beatification Ceremony of our Brother, Eustace Kugler at Regensburg on October 4th of this year. .

For the more than 8,000 people, not to mention those who followed the ceremonies live on T.V. and radio - Brothers, Co-workers and friends of the Family of St. John of God from all over the world who joined the members of the Diocese of Regensburg, the Church in Germany and the Bavarian Province for the *Beatification of Br. Eustace Kugler* in Regensburg, the events of October 4th and 5th was an unforgettable experience. To have a member of one's family recognised by the Church as a person of such exceptional holiness, spirituality and human qualities that he can be given as an example, a model, a guide and a sources of inspiration and encouragement for humanity, fills the family members with a deep sense of pride, privilege and wonder, that unites them in a bond of love wherever they maybe.

A day of great joy for the Family of St. John of God

This was especially true for the members of the *Family of St. John of God* spread across the world in 52 countries with the Beatification of Blessed Eustace Kugler. The hearts and minds of the hundreds of thousands who make up our great family - Brothers, Co-workers, benefactors, volunteers and friends – were turned towards *Regensburg on October 4th*. On this joyful occasion united as one family *we embraced the world in a great act of hospitality, thanksgiving and fraternity*. Wherever a member of the Family of St. John of God was on that special day, his/her mind and heart was *turned towards Regensburg* to honour, to rejoice, to pray to our Brother Eustace, of whom we are so proud and to whom we commit all of our worries, the needs of our beloved Order, the poor and sick whom we serve and their families.

Br. Eustace lived through an extremely difficult period in the history of Germany and Europe in general, when society was torn apart by deep divisions caused by war and violence. Yet, he succeeded in making a Gospel-inspired response to the demands of his age with which he was confronted. He stood as a true beacon of faith, hope and charity, marked out by his courage and determination. In God's name, who in Jesus reveals himself as the Father of all, Br. Eustace defended the weakest against repression and discrimination.

Br. Eustace was an unassuming, humble Brother of St. John of God, yet he can be considered in every respect, a shining light, a wonderful example of what is best and noblest in the human being, in the Christian, in the religious Brother. Br. Eustace was a visionary in his own lifetime and since his death in 1946, he has become a beacon of hope to numerous people, especially those who are finding life difficult because of

illness or disability. Br. Eustace had many of the qualities of St. John of God: a deep love for and total trust in God, filial devotion to Our Blessed Mother, a passion for suffering humanity, joyful in service and the ability to enthuse and involve others in his work

Source of Br. Eustace's hope and strength

Like St. John of God, prayer was the bedrock of Br. Eustace's life. It was in prayer that he found solace, peace and from which he derived courage and determination when faced with adversity and apparently insurmountable obstacles. Whether it was the suffering of trying to protect and defend the weakest, people with a disability, the long and frequent interrogations by the Gestapo, during which he was intimidated by his interrogators and had scorn poured upon him, he was able to remain calm and resolute. Despite the intimidation Br. Eustace firmly defended the Order's hospitals and mission.

It is not difficult to imagine what it must have been like in those difficult times as Provincial to have the responsibility for 16 Hospitals and 400 Brothers and the construction of the hospital at Regensburg. This would have been a daunting, even overwhelming task, for a lesser individual, but for Br. Eustace, who had total trust in God, it was his conviction that enabled him to face such huge challenges with serenity and conviction. His faith was what sustained him, often spending the whole night in prayer. There were no events, however grave, that discouraged or distracted him from his determination to do good and to fully live out the responsibility that came from his consecration in Hospitality.

Brother's vocation sign of peace and hope

We may therefore say that the life our newly declared Blessed, should be a stimulus for all men and women of good will to work at promoting peace and justice no matter what obstacles may have to be faced or mountains have to be climbed. Acknowledging the dignity of every human being born into the world, respect for life from conception to natural death, promoting and defending each individual's civil and human rights, helps to create a society in which all can feel a part, all feel safe and welcome, respected and valued, irrespective of individual challenges because of ill health, social status, background or disability. This son of Bavaria, Blessed Eustace Kugler, is an outstanding example for all to follow; he shows us how to create a caring and inclusive society, from which no one feels excluded, unloved, uncared for or unwelcome.

The Beatification of two of our Brothers within a twelve month period should confirm and affirm us, the Brothers, in our holy calling as Brothers of St. John of God. The vocation of the religious Brother demonstrates or brings to the fore in our time, in our communities, in society, in the church, the way of life that Jesus chose for himself. *Jesus became brother to all of humanity.* This is why Pope John Paul II could state that *fraternity, being brother, is a spiritual richness for the church and a medicine for humanity.* The *Vocation of the Brother is complete in itself,* states Vita Consecrate.

The way of life of the religious Brother, therefore, is one of the possibilities that need to be presented to any young man when considering his life options. It is a way living and witnessing to one's Christian vocation in an authentic and relevant manner for our time. As we see in the lives of Br. Eustace Kugler and Br. Olallo Valdes, and so many other Brothers who belonged to a great variety of religious institutes in the church, the life of the religious Brother gives witness to Christ on the mountain in prayer, Christ the teacher, Christ the healer, Christ the compassionate one. The Brother by the very nature of his calling *to brother* promotes fraternity, peace, hospitality and justice among peoples, as he strives for personal holiness of life.

Everybody that participated in the Beatification Ceremony in Regensburg Cathedral of Blessed Eustace will, I am quite sure, have returned home carrying with them their own personal memories of this exceptional occasion. It was a special moment for all of us during the Eucharist Celebration when Br. Eustace Kugler was declared BLESSED. The Pope's representative Mgr. Angelo Amato, Prefect of the Congregation for Saints, read the Decree of Beatification that was signed by Pope Benedict XVI and the veil that covered the portrait of the newly declared Blessed that hung at the side of the Altar was removed.

A special moment to share

For me there was another special moment however, a very personal experience, that I would like to share with you. As part of the ceremony, you might say almost like pageantry, there was an event that had a profound meaning because of the people that were involved. As the moment of Consecration approached I observed 12 people, 10 of whom had an intellectual disability, representing the various centers of the Bavarian Province, and two St. John of God Brothers, process to the Altar each holding a lighted candle. Hitler had stated that such people were *not fit to live*, were *a cancer* on the psyche of the nation. At the high point of the Eucharistic Celebration, I hear the Celebrant utter the words of Consecration *This is my body*. At that moment I realized that these words were not only said over the bread and wine, but over all of those present, including the 12 figures kneeling around the altar with lighted candles. The symbolism was so powerful, it left me deeply moved. I was reminded of the words spoken to Saul on the road to Damascus, *Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?* (Acts 9:4) or Jesus Himself saying, *Whatever you do to one of these the least of my brothers and sisters, you do to me.* (Mt 25: 31-46)

With that spectacle before us, the words spoken, the reason why we were all there brought home to me what it means to be declared BLESSED or canonised. Here we had before our eyes the miracle of light overcoming darkness, good overcoming evil, love overcoming hatred, hospitality replacing hostility. Light, love, goodness and hospitality was what defined the life of Blessed Eustace; these were the virtues which he radiated during his life and he continues to be a beacon for all of us to follow. For me this scene at the Altar summarized the outstanding legacy that Br. Eustace has left us. It was also a vivid reminder of the wonder and beauty of the *gift of hospitality* itself, which God gives to his Church and to society. When lived to its full, as

demonstrated in the life of Br. Eustace, and made visible during all of the ceremonies surrounding his Beatification, John-of-God Hospitality is life-giving, with the power to transform lives.

This event, the Beatification of a Brother who gave witness to the radical following of Christ, is a grace for us all, an opportunity to renew our commitment to continuing the work of St. John of God with the love, determination and joy shown us by Blessed Eustace. The Church by officially recognizing the holiness of life of Br. Eustace, offers him as an example to be emulated. Let us now pray to him, invite him to be our companion on the journey through life.

Words of gratitude

I wish to wholeheartedly thank Br. Emerich Steigerwald, the Provincial of the Bavarian Province, and all the members of the Province for making the Beatification of Blessed Eustace Kugler such an exceptional occasion for the Church and for the Order. The meticulous preparation, coupled with the very warm hospitality extended to all of the visitors from around the world, made it a celebration of hospitality and fraternity. Truly, for those privileged to have traveled to Regensburg for the occasion it will remain a memory to savor for a long time to come.

A work well done

With the Beatification of Blessed Eustace Kugler concludes more than 20 years of services of Br. Felix Lizaso as the Order's Postulator. On behalf of the entire Order I wish to acknowledge and thank wholeheartedly Br. Felix for the wonderful service that he has rendered to the Order and to the Church. The work of the Postulator, among other technical matters related to the individual causes stipulated by the Congregation for Saints in the Vatican, is to collect and disseminate information on Brothers whose holiness of life is recognized and to promote their causes. The Postulator also educates and supports the individual person in the Province with particular responsibility for the cause in question and who liaises with the office of the Postulator.

This is the second Brother of the Order within a 12 month period to be beatified, Br. Olallo Valdes being the other, which means that Br. Felix's work load was enormous over many years in the preparation of both causes, as well as many other Brothers who have been canonised already, starting with St. Richard Pampuri, or those Brothers already beatified and those others whose causes are current at this time. Once again on behalf of the Church and the Order we thank Br. Felix Lizaso most sincerely for the outstanding service that he has rendered in his role as Postulator of the Order. We wish him many blessings, good health, inner peace and strength as he commences a new phase in his life back in his own Province of Aragon.

The new Postulator of the Order is Br. Elia Tripaldi who is a General Councillor and a member of the Roman Province. We thank Br. Elia for accepting this very responsible position and assure him of our support and above all of our prayers.

Conclusion

Finally, as the Special General Chapter is now only weeks away, I would ask for your prayers that the participants will be open to the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit. May it be an experience of fraternity, openness and hospitality for all the participants.

Inspired by the example of Blessed Eustace, let us continue with joy and dedication the work of St. John of God. With confidence in the powerful intercession of Our Blessed Lady, Mother of Good Council, and our new Blessed, Eustace Kugler, let us pray for the success of our General Chapter, for peace in our troubled world, for reconciliation among all peoples, for those who are unemployed and their families, for people who are sick and suffering, especially those in our centers or attending services provided by the Order.

As always, fraternally yours in St. John of God.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Donatus Forkan O.H.", written in black ink on a light background.

Br. Donatus Forkan, O.H.
Prior General