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Priore Generale

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Christmas 2010

"Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord."

(Lk 2, 10-11)

**To the Saint John of God Family Members:
Brothers, Co-workers, Volunteers, Benefactors and all those we serve through the
Charism of Hospitality.**

Dear brothers and sisters in Hospitality,

Preamble

We are looking forward to celebrating Christmas, the mystery of the Incarnation, one of the most loved and anticipated festivals of Christians everywhere. We know that waiting for Christmas is different from looking forward to other events, because it is full of joy, and permeated through with the love which restores hope, unites us with our loved ones and brings peace to our hearts.

A 'Scarf of Hope'

This sense of waiting, longing and remembering reminds me of something that I heard about which took place in Peru recently. The women of the Andes knitted a coloured scarf - the 'Scarf of Hope' - which measures a kilometre in length, on which they wove a message or epitaph, the size of an A4 sheet of paper for each of their loved ones that went missing during the internal conflict of some years ago in that country. It is reported that more than 15,000 people mostly husbands and sons disappeared during this period. It is the remembering of the coming of Our Saviour at Christmas that helps people, like the people of Peru and so many others throughout the world today to face events in their lives that makes no sense, defies an adequate explanation or response. Remembering the events of Bethlehem on Christmas night gives hope and courage to those who at times feel the pangs of loss and lowliness, almost to the point of despair.

We are so fortunate that in a wonderful way, the Gospel story keeps the truth of Jesus intact. It tells us about Jesus as a poor and defenceless child, while at the same time enabling us to hear the angels revealing His true nature, telling us that this tiny child is God, manifesting Himself to the world by choosing the path of poverty. Luke, speaking of Jesus' infancy in his Gospel, tells us that the path of the Messiah like the path of the Church's mission in all ages can never be the path of domination, or of spectacular events or miracles, but is the path of the least, the path of service. Luke shows us the very close link that exists between the presence of God in the history of the poor, and the way that His glory is revealed to them. We are waiting for a tiny, defenceless baby, the *human one* who could not find hospitality in anyone's home, an infant who was born in a place used to shelter animals, the *stable* in Bethlehem. The baby Jesus was not placed in a special beautifully carved cradle that Joseph would most certainly have prepared using all his skills as a carpenter had circumstances been different, but in a *manger* used to feed animals. Humanity failed to prepare a worthy place for the Author of Life to come into the world.

Our Christmas Eucharist helps us to express this great longing which forms part of the eager expectation that runs throughout the whole of the History of Salvation. For it is precisely during these days, as we prepare for the great event of our salvation, that through the readings which the Liturgy offers us every day, we hear the powerful voices of the Prophets ringing in our ears and finding an echo in our hearts. This helps to transform us with a rare strength, making us ever more receptive to the Word of God. When we meditate on the events that we are celebrating, we place ourselves before the great mystery of God's love, which awakens within us sentiments of deepest adoration and gratitude. This makes us reflect on the fact that God who made the world hospitable enough to welcome humanity was not recognised and welcomed by His own creatures, but had to enter the world through a stable.

A 'Lighted Candle'

But those who did welcome the Word of God, humbly and unobtrusively, showed Him a particular love, beginning with Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, and including the Magi. Here we have a section of humanity who brought into being a new world, a world imbued with a sense of outreach, welcome and hospitality. "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes him who sent me. (Matthew 10:37-42). The example of Mary, Joseph, the shepherds and Magi combined with the words of Jesus recorded in Matthew gives clear direction and take on particular urgency in the world in which we live. Today's world cries out for examples like these that will bring light into the darkness of peoples lives especially at this time, a time of great difficulty and challenge for many families. Jesus is that light, He emphatically states *I am the light of the world* (John 8; 12). It is important to note that it is the paschal mystery of Easter that lights up the crib at Christmas. In Ireland there is a tradition that dates back for many centuries of placing a large lighted candle in the window on Christmas Eve. The candle in the window, which is still a favourite traditional Irish Christmas decoration, stems from the custom of lighting the way of the stranger. It is a symbol of hospitality, a way of welcoming any travellers who might happen to pass by looking for a warm place to stay, and of welcoming the Holy

Family too. This Christmas let us open our hearts to the Christ Child and open our homes to those who seek the warmth of human company, friendship and sustenance.

The mystery of Christmas

Dear brothers and sisters, as we kneel before the Christmas Crib a great mystery is displayed right there before our very eyes, almost too good to be true! In the face of such a beautiful mystery we feel like the father who approached Jesus and asked him to cure his seriously ill son, Jesus asked him, do you believe that I can do this? *And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief.* (Mark:9:24) We all know how weak our faith is, so our prayer for ourselves and for all who wish to believe must be like this desperate father, Lord, *I believe; help my, help our unbelief.* The spark of faith was kindled in the father of the seriously sick child, and so too will our faith be strengthened if we only ask for it. If your faith is weak, and whose faith is not weak, cry for help, we are all invited to adore our God in the Infant Child. Let us not be afraid to approach the crib and to open our minds and hearts to His truth, His goodness and His love. In turn we show our love for God by placing ourselves at the service of the poor and those in need, so that they too may come to experience the compassionate love of their heavenly Father for them; it is there, in our sick and needy brother and sister, that God is waiting for us.

Offering Hospitality transforms both the host and the guest

We are passing through very difficult times from so many points of view. The global economic and financial crisis is hurting so many families, including our own care Centres. There is huge uncertainty about the immediate future, and this is compounded by the overall political situation which is causing so many sleepless nights to very many people. We all have the feeling that certain values are being lost, but this is our world, the world into which Jesus came because he loves it. It is also the world into which we as *ambassadors of love* are being sent to take the Good News that is the only way to find real hope and salvation. Alone, without God's help, there is very little we can do, but by his grace extraordinary things can and will happen. It is the responsibility of us all to rediscover those spiritual energies to proclaim to the world the everlasting novelty of the message that rang out from Bethlehem when the angels visited the shepherds to announce to them the great event of our Saviour's birth.

The story of Jesus' birth confirms the importance of showing hospitality and welcoming people in, particularly when people are in need, when even a tiny gesture acquires great importance, primarily because it enables others to feel that their dignity is being respected. Jesus was immediately confronted by the consequences of selfishness and closed hearts which excluded him from having a "human" place through which to enter the world. I cannot fail to recall in this regard the figure of our Founder, Saint John of God, who tried to tell those poor people of Granada, through deeds of hospitality, that God loves them and that he wants them to have a different environment permeated with love, solidarity and respect that befits their dignity.

Conclusion

At this Christmastide my thoughts go out in particular to all those who are sick and in need, and I wish all those who will be spending the Christmas holidays in one of our Care Centres, for one reason or another, to feel as welcome there as they are in their own homes. Like the **'Scarf of Hope'** or the **'Lighted Candle'** I hope that each one of you will experience the warm glow of Christmas that will light up your hearts bringing healing, peace, courage and hope.

Finally, my best wishes go out to all of you members of the Saint John of God Family, Brothers, Co-workers, volunteers, and benefactors, hoping that you will spend this holy time in joy and peace with your loved ones, not forgetting those who need you by their side, and require your help. In particular I wish to remember with affection and gratitude those of you who will be on duty over the holiday period. You are the 'innkeepers' who, unlike the innkeeper in Bethlehem, are **offering John-of-God-Hospitality** to those far from home and their loved ones, helping them to experience some of the warmth and peace of Christmas at a difficulty time in their lives. May God bless and reward you all in a special way for this great kindness.

On behalf of the General Government of the Order, and the General Curia Community and Co-workers, I wish you all a Happy and Blessed Christmas, full of true peace and joy, and may Our Lord, with His blessing, remain by your side throughout the New Year 2011.



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