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Priore Generale

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FEAST OF THE NATIVITY OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

TO THE WHOLE ORDER

*" Your Birth, O Virgin Mother of God, heralded joy to all the world.
For from you has risen the Sun of justice, Christ our God.*

(Antiphon for the *Benedictus*)

Dear Brothers Sisters in Hospitality,

For the Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, an event in which *"we see the beauty of God's plan, a parable of salvation beginning with God and once again returning to Him"*,¹ I should like to share with you the joy of this "appearance" of the life of Mary that we are celebrating in praise and thanksgiving to our Lord.

God truly placed in Mary the sources of life (cf *Responsorial psalm*) in a most unusual and unique manner: for it was in her heart and in her womb that Jesus, the Son of God made man for us, was given life.

From the beginning of her existence, Mary formed part of God's plan and His project of salvation for the whole of humanity. From the Annunciation with her "be it done to me" accepting God's plan, as far as Calvary, following her Son in His suffering and Passion, she also shared with Him the same destiny of glory in which she achieved full and perfect communion and conformity with the Risen Jesus.

¹ Benedict XVI, Cagliari, 7. IX. 2008.

The whole earthly existence of the Blessed Virgin Mary teaches us how to achieve the fulfilment of this project of salvation, showing us the way with faith and service. She always believed, and her humility (*Lk 1,48*) is the explanation of her mystery. She was full of grace because she emptied herself, ever ready to accept the other, pointing the way to reach her Son. She was a true Teacher of Hospitality.

Throughout its history our Order has always felt the closeness and the protection of Our Blessed Lady, and her example has spurred us on to be ever more generous in our hospitality. It is for this reason that the Constitutions urge us to imitate her “simplicity, availability to others, self-giving and faithfulness” (*Const. 4 e*).

By looking to her we discover the values that underlie our life of faith: love, free self-giving and detachment from material things. Mary teaches us to abandon ourselves unconditionally, to listen and to welcome others, teaching us to bear witness to “that maternal love, by which it behooves that all should be animated who cooperate in the apostolic mission of the Church for the regeneration of men” (*LG 65*).

Contemplating the mystery of Our Blessed Lady and her role as a woman in the mystery of the Redemption, at this moment my thoughts go out to all the women in our Hospitaller Family who are actively and creatively contributing, through their hospitality, to the mission of the Order, to realising God's plan of salvation for His people. In the mission entrusted to us, this commitment to the advancement of women in every sphere of human life must be evident, particularly in countries where women today are not accorded their due rights and dignity.

The Gospel recounts Jesus' attitudes towards women with which the Order must increasingly fall into line. As we read through the Gospels we notice the presence of a great many women in the events of salvation (cf. *Mt 15, 28; Mk 1, 30; 5, 25-34; Mk 5, 41; Lk 7, 13; 8, 1-3; 13, 11*, etc.). In His work, Jesus did not discriminate against women, even though in his age serious prejudices existed against them.

But His way of acting was a complete novelty: among the various episodes we may recall His encounter with the Samaritan woman (*Jn 4, 7-27*) to see how things should be according to God. Jesus' attitude to the women he met in the course of His Messianic service is the eternal reflection of God's plan, under which, by creating each one of them He chose them and loved them in Christ. (cf. *Eph 1, 1-5*). Jesus of Nazareth confirmed this dignity, reminded us of it, and renewed it, and made it a substantial part of the Gospel and the Redemption, for which He was sent into the world.

In this sphere too, we must look to our Founder as an example. Many different states of need in the world of women were, for him, opportunities to remedy matters and always animated by his charity and mercy, feeling that he himself had been pardoned in love, he went out to the most marginal areas of human existence. Recalling the work of John God we can never forget the extreme care he showed to poor girls and Sisters, and the married women who suffered in silence from the state of deprivation in which they were forced to live. For them he requested charity from the wealthy, and went out to obtain cloth and pieces of linen for them to work on, so that they would not remain idle. Another task he set himself was to redeem prostitutes and put them back on the right path (Cf. *F. de Castro, chapters XII and XIII*) which caused him great suffering and mortification.

Dear Brothers Sisters, let us learn from St John of God to become signs of hope and consolation in the world of suffering and need, authentic promoters of the dignity of women, and through our lives to announce that, day by day, our existence is fashioned by Hospitality, and what it means to rise again with Christ.

Let us ask the Blessed Virgin Mary, whose birth we are celebrating, to intercede for us with her Son, so that we can have her faith, her hope and her love, manifesting them in the hospitality which we practise every day.

With my fraternal good wishes in St John of God.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Donatus Forkan" with a stylized flourish at the end.

Bro. Donatus Forkan
Prior General