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Priore Generale

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“With one heart all these joined constantly in prayer, together with some women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.(Acts 1,14)

To all the Brothers in the Order

My dear Brothers,

Preamble

We have just concluded the climax of the liturgical calendar with the celebration of Easter so rich in mystery, full of meaning and hope, which is so much needed in our church and in the world of today. I wish to greet each of you personally and to assure you that whatever the circumstances in which you live and minister I am with you in my prayers, trusting that all of us together can be authentic witnesses to the Risen Lord as the God of Hospitality.

In the past I have generally addressed Circular Letters to *all* the members of the Family of Saint John of God. However, on this occasion for various reasons I would like to address this letter specifically to the Brothers. We are approaching the end of the six year mandate of the present General Government of the Order. Over this period the Order intensified its efforts in the renewal process. Likewise it sought to find the most appropriate ways of responding to the challenges to our way of life and mission of Hospitality where we have a presence around the world. In this letter to help in the preparation for our General Chapter I hope to share a reflection with you - where we have come from since the conclusion of the Vatican Council and where we seem to be heading as the Family of Saint John of God.

The essential role of the Brother

In all of this the essential role of the Brother in advancing, guiding and modeling for a more charismatic, evangelical and prophetic John-of-God-Hospitality appropriate to our time was never in doubt. However, what is now needed is to re-ignite that inner fire, reclaim the first fervor that will ignite a fresh passion for Christ and a passion for

suffering humanity. This way of thinking and acting opens up new ways and possibilities for presence in ministry, encourages communion and community, prayer – both personal and community – and a real partnership with our Co-workers in advancing the work of Saint John of God. This approach reflects the path of renewal we have engaged in since Vatican II. What is of the greatest importance is that we continue to keep ourselves up-to-date and aware of the world around us and its great need of the witness of Gospel values. An acute awareness of this nature will release fresh energy for mission and contribute to the birth of a new way of *ministerial religious life* that is now emerging. Fidelity to our Charism will help to shape this new lifeform of *ministerial religious life*.

To be a religious today is tremendously exciting, challenging and of course a great privilege to be birthing the new. The decisions taken in Chapter will have huge implications for shaping the way we live and minister in the future. This is an enormous responsibility for all of us as we prepare for this most important event in our history. This is why I encourage all members of the great Family of Saint John of God, like the disciples of Jesus, to be united in prayer with Our Blessed Lady¹, Mother of Good Council and Queen of Hospitality. As we proceed, it is becoming increasingly more evident that the Brother will continue to play an important role in the great Family of Saint John of God as he is an essential figure who maintains the link with our Founder, which ensures continuity of the mission of Saint John of God across time. The Brothers' role will be different to that of the past as he is a member of a universal brotherhood with global responsibility for the Charism. Having a sense of belonging to a *universal Brotherhood* will help to prevent fragmentation and promote the concept of a *family* that has a global responsibility for the whole mission of St John of God. This sense of universality must be made clear right from the beginning of the formation process, helping the candidate appreciate and understand that he enters or joins an Order, a Brotherhood, that is international and not a Province. To cultivate this sense of family, with a global responsibility for the mission of Hospitality, we must be much more flexible, available, and outreaching towards the needs of the Saint John of God Family worldwide.

An essential link with our charismatic origins, fifty years after the Council

We are now moving towards another very important commemoration: the 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council which changed the face of the Church and radically affected the Church's mission; and it also coincides with the celebration of our own 68th General Chapter at Fatima, Portugal. As you are aware, the General Chapter will have as title or slogan '*The Family of Saint John of God at the Service of Hospitality.*' We only have a few months to prepare ourselves for this most important event in the life of our Order.

It is good at this juncture to recall that the renewal process pursued by the Order down the decades since the Generalate of Br. Hyginus Aparicio (1959-1970) was not taken in a isolation but rather it was driven by and seen through the *wide angle lens* of the Council documents, especially: *Perfectae Caritatis* on the renewal of Religious Life;

¹ Acts: 1,14

Lumen Gentium the document on the nature of the Church and where it affirms the universal call to holiness of all the baptized and Gaudium et Spes the document on the Church in the modern world. It was important to approach renewal with this perspective or mindset when it came to managing change, updating lifestyle, seeking a rootedness for our spirituality and ministry. Renewal that resulted from seeking novelty or change for the sake of change or on an *a la carte* basis usually failed. It gave false hopes that lacked depth, continuity and direction. It failed because it was not rooted in scripture, the original inspiration of the founder and an interpretation of the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel as mandated by the Council. Like the seed sown on rocky ground referred to in the Parable of the Sower, it sprung up quickly but died almost immediately.²

Something unique to the Christian religion

When we look at the great religious traditions throughout the world we can see common features shared with our own Catholic Christian tradition, such as contemplation, the hermitical life, the penitential life, etc.; yet in the other religions we rarely find men and women who consecrate themselves to God for the whole of their lives at the service of the poor, the sick, the abandoned and the needy. In our Christian tradition these men and women religious have left everything to follow their vocation, including family ties and material possessions. Their personal Life Project is driven exclusively by the one desire to show the world the primacy of God over everything and His proximity to us that reveals Him to be the Father of us all. It is truly an exceptional and amazing calling.

Before the Second Vatican Council, the Religious Life was markedly monastic in character, a conventual way of life that reflected an ecclesiology of the time. I have already referred to this in previous letters, so I do not wish to address the matter in detail here. What I do wish to say is that a new form of religious life, *ministerial religious life* that is *non-monastic* is being born³. Whereas the monastic or conventual way of life helped us in our mission of Hospitality in the past, it is no longer appropriate to meet the needs of modern times. I believe that the time has come to let go of this way of thinking in order to allow, to facilitate, the birth of the new. This places on us a huge responsibility but it is also a great privilege to be in a position to help shape the future in this way.

Our world needs witnesses more than teachers⁴

In the Order we have Brothers who received their formation before the Second Vatican Council, and others who received it during or after the Council; and the younger Brothers have only heard people talking about this period in the Church's history and the passion which accompanied the changes it brought about, because they never experienced it first-hand. The urgent task that awaits all of us, and in particular

² Mark 4:16

³ The past and future of ministerial religious life by Sr. Sandra M. Schneiders, an America theologian.

⁴ Evangelli Nunciandi, 41

our younger Brothers, is to study and inwardly digest the documents of that extraordinary Council which took the Church out to the world, as well as the documents of the Magisterium and the writings of the Priors General following the Council, to help us in this renewal process.

At the present time, in which the Church and religious life are going through a crisis, there are many young people in the world entering seminaries and Religious Institutes, taking up an ancient traditional kind of Religious Life, moved by the desire to restore a form of Christianity which no longer exists at all. I believe that this is a path without a future, and unrealistic, even though I do understand that the young people are searching for certainties regarding their own identity. Resisting the changes that are currently taking place would be tantamount to resisting the Holy Spirit. The past belongs to history. On the other hand ahead of us lie new things, fresh opportunities for mission, new challenges that require responses that are appropriate to our time and not of the past – as Luke says, ‘new wineskins for the new wine’! “No one puts new wine into old wineskins, or else the new wine will burst the skins, and it will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved.”⁵

There is a widespread awareness that we are going through a hastening process of change, and it sometimes seems as if the Church is struggling to respond to the new realities quickly enough. This is certainly a challenge for us as well, but I am certain that if our life is faithful to the Gospel of Jesus and the original inspiration of Saint John of God we shall be able to make the most appropriate response. Many young people are leaving the Church because they cannot find in her a credible testimony, and consistency with the values she professes. Mediocrity is something that attracts no-one, and indeed has the effect of being a counter-testimony.

And this is the challenge that we are all facing: remaining faithful to God, to the Gospel, and to the vows we have professed, as a fundamental precondition for the subsequent quest for ways of living and speaking which are more familiar to young people today. This by no means signifies that we must water down the demands of our consecrated life or tamper with the doctrine of the Church. Quite the contrary! Without consistency, we shall not get far.

What Pope Paul VI states in this regard in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* applies to all Christians of course but in a particular way to us Religious. He states that “the first means of evangelization is witness of authentic Christian life...modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses...it is primarily by her conduct and by her life that the Church will evangelize the world...in other words by living witness of fidelity to the Lord Jesus...the witness of sanctity⁶” We *ministerial religious* are called to be in the midst of people, especially the most neglected, those who feel abandoned and lonely, witnessing to the Gospel of mercy and the God of Hospitality. In my opinion, this is what is meant by *discerning the signs of the times* as the Council affirmed, but doing so in the light of the Gospel.

⁵ Luke 5: 37,38

⁶ *Evg. N.* 41

The path of authentic renewal

Like the Church, over the past 50 years our Order has changed a great deal in its attempt to respond to the promptings of the Second Vatican Council. As stated earlier, to see where the Holy Spirit intends to lead us we need to continue to be guided and enlightened by Constitutions *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes* and the Decree *Perfectae Caritatis* and relevant documents and insights. The Brothers have experienced that being guided by the teachings of the Council leads to radical change that is based on *Scripture*, our *original Charism*, and the reading of *the signs of the times* in the light of the Gospel.

I personally believe that through the renewal process one of the most significant discoveries that the Order made was *John of God*, the man, his mission and the rich legacy that he bequeathed to his followers. John became our ‘polar star’ our companion who lights up our pathway. He helped us to break down the walls that separated us from a wider world of suffering than the one we were engaged in. This presented so many opportunities to express the Charism of Hospitality, which has mushroomed around the world where the Order has a presence.

The future is not the continuation of the past

As we prepare for our General Chapter it is important to recall where we have come from and the effects that the renewal of the religious life have had on our Order. In my opinion this is important because renewal is ongoing, it is very much a work in progress. In *Vita Consecrata*, the Holy Father, Blessed John Paul II, urges Religious to cultivate “fidelity to the founding Charism and subsequent spiritual heritage”(n.36) of their institute. In order to develop “a dynamic fidelity to their mission”(n 37), consecrated persons should remember at all times their founder’s biblical criterion of discernment, because authentic renewal needs “fidelity to the inspiration of the founders and foundresses”.(n 36)

For me renewal is the key to the future and the future is not the continuation of the past, but *the birthing of the new*. At the present time a new way of living the religious life is being born. In order to allow the new to emerge we have to let go of many cherished ways of the past. As some mammals slough off their skin to allow new fresh skin to emerge, so too we must let go of the old monastic ways of life to allow the new *ministerial religious life* to be born. In the past we lived fully the monastic way of life and the active apostolic way of life. *Priority* of the religious life in this context was *personal sanctification* and *secondly the ministry of service to the sick*. Today we see ourselves as *Brothers consecrated in Hospitality*. That implies that we are to be available, flexible, open to new needs and to working in collaboration with others. This obliges us in addition to be moral guides, critical consciences, animating and prophetic presences to engage in the *ministry of encouragement* of our Co-workers with whom we work in partnership for evangelization.

How often, in the past, have we felt that we were incapable of responding to all the new, urgent demands facing and surrounding our Centers! But the Lord has replied to these uncertainties by involving our Co-workers, just as Saint John of God did with Angulo – Juan d’Avila. Thanks to the courage of the Brothers in taking up this

challenge, today we have so many services undergoing all-out expansion in which the Order is deploying its mission, and indeed we have some Centers without the presence of a Religious Community or even one Brother. The Co-workers in these Centers and Services have succeeded in keeping alive the spirit of Saint John of God because of their adherence to the philosophy, guiding principles and values of the Order.

Where renewal has led the Order

As part of the renewal strategy that the Order has been engaged in, in addition to the way our mission of Hospitality is rapidly evolving, many of our Centers have lay management. In Europe virtually all the managers of our Centers are Co-workers. The documentation for a PJP (Public Juridical Personality) is currently with the Holy See for final approval, having already been approved by the General Definitory. This means that Co-workers and Brothers will take joint responsibility at the highest levels for managing of our Hospitaller Ministries. There are many positive aspects to the setting up of a PJP. It gives the Laity not only responsibility for a ministry of the church but the authority to make decisions. Another significant aspect is that the choice of persons to serve on the Board is not based on gender, but rather on the individuals identification with the Charism, professional competence and a commitment to demonstrating what is fundamental in the Gospel through the promotion of the principles, philosophy and values that underpin the mission of the Order of Saint John of God. This is entirely in accordance with the teaching and spirit of Vatican II. We are envisaging a new way of being for our Order today, dictated by the challenges we face but also the opportunities that present themselves for our Mission of Hospitality. If we act differently, we run the risk of very rapidly losing most of our care centers.

Starting Afresh from Christ⁷

This short historical overview of the Order's post-Conciliar experience shows us that every Brother must be an active front-line player in this renewal process. It is not personal self-fulfillment that I am referring to, but the fact of feeling part of a greater mission, just like Saint John of God, who did not have a mission of his own, but threw himself body and soul into the mission of Christ. We are all individuals with our own limitations, and alone there is very little we can do. However, by choosing Christ, by working together, we all become something greater still. "Today's world is expecting to see in consecrated men and women the concrete reflection of Jesus' way of acting, of his love for every person without distinction or qualification"⁸. I would therefore like every Brother, from the youngest to the most senior, to devote themselves with enthusiasm and dedication to a deeper renewal both personal and communitarian. Hospitality when lived in the style and spirit of Saint John of God is a truly amazing and a extraordinary gift for the difficult times through which we are passing, a gift which is capable of creating communion and involving everyone, with all our diversity, making up a single *family* gathered around these same values. This is why we must be aware that the Family of Saint John of God is an enormous resource for the mission because in itself it is capable of expressing the plurality of different gifts, *united in Hospitality*.

⁷ A Renewal Commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium by CICLSAL, 2002

⁸ SAfC 2d

Looking at the world through the eyes of Hospitality

It bears repeating, to view our world through the *Eyes of Hospitality* is to see it through the *Eyes of God*. It is to recognize that everything and everyone that God has created *is good*⁹. The world we live in is torn apart by wars, violence, hatred, crises, abuse of power, suspicion of the stranger and corruption, yet this is the world that God loves passionately; after all he gave his life for it¹⁰. However, the very existence of God is being called into question and even denied by some. The Holy Father asks: “*Is it perhaps the case that the West, the heartlands of Christianity, are tired of their faith, bored by their history and culture, and no longer wish to know faith in Jesus Christ*”¹¹? Just as so many Brothers did at the beginning of the post-Conciliar renewal, every Brother today needs to be aware of the world around him. He needs to look at the world through the eyes of faith, through the eyes of Hospitality, through the eyes of God. In this way he will find his true role in the midst of the world as one consecrated in Hospitality to witness to the radical following of Jesus and His Healing Ministry.

It is here, more than anywhere else, that the parable of the leaven in the dough applies (Mt 13, 33; Lk 13, 20-21; 1 Cor 5, 6-8), and we Brothers must take on this role for ourselves. It is true that we are few in number, but there are certainly enough of us to act as leaven for the Hospitality of Saint John of God as expressed in the world today. Our Co-workers look to us for consistent and authentic testimony, which places a huge responsibility on us to provide formation for our Brothers so that they will be reliable and coherent companions with the Co-workers along the path of Hospitality.

Family of Saint John of God

We have celebrated the *Year of the Family of Saint John of God* (2011-2012) which was a most invigorating and energizing experience. It is my hope and wish that the concept of *Family to describe who we are as Hospitallers* will continue with even greater vigor into the future because of this experience. Seeing ourselves as a Family is a result of the renewal process. Our Family “attains full significance in the mission for which the Holy Spirit has brought it into being in the Church”. (Const. Art 41). I have a sense that there is a heightened awareness of the nature of the Order and its mission of Hospitality around the world. Furthermore, I believe people of today find the idea of a *Family and John-of-God-Hospitality* very attractive. The idea of “family” immediately evokes something more than simple functional relations or a mere convergence of interests. *The family is by nature a community based on mutual trust, mutual support and sincere respect. In an authentic family the strong do not dominate; instead, the weaker members, because of their very weakness, are all the more welcomed and served*¹². In my view these characteristics, and others, as expressed by Pope John Paul II defines the *Family of Saint John of God*, as I understand it: a **community** where there is **mutual trust, support, generosity, openness, sincere respect, hospitality** and **unity** in mission. This ties in very much with the attitude that John of God himself had in his relationship with Angulo and others who shared his life and ministry.

⁹ Genesis 1: 18

¹⁰ John 10:11, 17-18

¹¹ Pope Benedict XVI Chrism Mass, 2011

¹² Address of Pope John Paul II at United Nations, October 05th. 1995

The concept of *family* denotes an openness, welcoming, non-judgmental, pluralism with a deep sense of community. The *Family of Saint John of God* is something to which people have a sense of belonging. There is a feeling of being at home even if the members come from different faith traditions. Christians, some of whom may be experiencing some difficulty with the hierarchal church and people who do not espouse any particular faith tradition or none have a sense that they are accepted into the Family of Saint John of God and their contribution to the mission is valued and appreciated. Being inclusive and inviting to those who share our philosophy and values opens up immense possibilities for the mission, a phrase St. Paul uses and which Saint John of God made his own “Let us not become weary of doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.”¹³

Formation

In the past, the Brothers received a formation in every area of the Order's life: management, health care, pastoral care and so on. Today, drawing on the documents of the Second Vatican Council, the Religious Life is taking on its prophetic role more than ever before, in this secularized world, by bearing witness to the values of the Kingdom of God. The formation of our Brothers therefore, as has been said so many times already, is a fundamental aspect of the renewal process that is shaping our lives. Without formation there can be no renewal. All Hospitallers, including the candidates to our Brotherhood, should share in aspects of initial and ongoing formation. This is very important because in the future they will be ministering together. Obviously, aspects of formation for the Brothers will be separate insofar as it pertains to the Consecrated Life. Here, too, the figure of our Founder, and what he did, is enlightening for us. In his biography, Francisco de Castro said that even when John was away, the *House of Hospitality* that he had founded functioned perfectly, and when he returned having been absent for weeks or months he found everything in order. This tells us a great deal about not only the trust John placed in those who worked by his side at the service of the poor and the sick, but how he *formed* them. I am convinced that if we pursue the same path together with our Co-workers it will be very fruitful for the whole Church today and in terms of our relationships that will have an enormous impact on our mission.

Young people today have a great thirst for spirituality in every part of the world. The *Spirituality in the Manner of Saint John of God*, which we have inherited, can certainly be one response to their quest for a meaning for their lives, which leads along the path to an encounter with Jesus Christ. Our acts of love, care and devotion have an extraordinary power in this regard. For many people, we are their first link with the face of God and God's mercy, and the first chance they have been given to turn to the Church or to embrace her. So many people whose life style has damaged their personal and family relations knock at the doors of our Centers every day. They come to us, expecting a word of comfort, someone to accompany them in this phase in their lives, however long or short it may be. When we look at the life of Jesus it is full of examples of people coming to him manifesting a physical or psychological complaint but leaving

¹³ Galatians 6: 9

his presence whole in body, mind and spirit. Many people come to our Centers too presenting with similar complaints or illnesses, but so many are also broken in spirit. It is a transforming experience for them when, as is so often the case, they meet a Brother who has time for them, is hospitable, compassionate, nonjudgmental and understanding. This too is evangelization for it is experiencing the presence of God.

A new approach to formation necessary

From the few references that I have given it is evident that we have great need to re-evaluate the type of formation that we are giving our Brothers. So many candidates come and then leave very quickly either during the Novitiate or the Scholasticate. If it is because they have discovered that they do not have a calling to our way of life, then we have performed a very good service to them. However, I suspect that this does not seem to be the case with many of those who join and leave our Order. There seems to be something lacking in our selection criteria and in the manner in which we accompany our candidates. There is very little accompaniment of the Scholastics, and I speak generally, there are exceptions, but many Scholastics are left to their own devices without accompaniment or any theological or spiritual formation.

I hasten to add that I am very appreciative of the Brothers appointed to formation, they work very hard and do the best they can, but unfortunately many are not adequately prepared for the very responsible and challenging mission entrusted to them. This needs to be addressed at the forthcoming General Chapter. Faced with the challenges of the New Evangelization, to lead *people "to the place of life, to friendship with the Son of God, to Him who gives us life, the fullness of life"*,¹⁴ the Order needs to have a very critical look at Formation guided by what we refer to as the *Mion Report*,¹⁵ that was presented at the 2006 General Chapter.

A New Pentecost

My dear Brothers, the stark reality is this: in the future we shall be fewer in number and older than we are today. Our mission however, continues to grow, and unless we embark along this path of renewal seriously, with adequate preparation and formation of our Brothers then the future of our Brotherhood is less certain. This is why the forthcoming 68th General Chapter can be a 'New Pentecost' for the whole Family of Saint John of God. "*O Holy Spirit, renew your wonders in this our day, as by a new Pentecost,*" was the prayer for the Council proposed by Pope John, let it be our prayer too for our Chapter.

I urge every Brother, and in particular the vocals elected to the General Chapter, to thoroughly study not only the *Instrumentum Laboris*, but above all the documents of the Second Vatican Council, subsequent theological studies on the future of the religious life, the *Mion Report*, and the publications of the General Curia so that they will be ready and prepared to take part in this important ecclesial event in the life of our

¹⁴ Benedict XVI, *Homily for the beginning of the Petrine ministry of the Bishop of Rome*, (24.04.2005): AAS 97(2005), p.710.

¹⁵ *The Hospitaller Order of Saint John of God, Faced with the Challenges Posed by Society, Looks at Itself and Plans the Way Ahead*, Salesian Pontifical University, Rome 2006

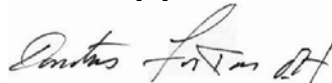
Order. It is very important for the vocals together with their Provincials to find the opportunity to work together, in a climate of prayer and sharing, to discuss and thoroughly prepare themselves well for the General Chapter so that it will be a watershed that promotes a new vision for the Order into the future.

Conclusion

In conclusion, my Dear Brothers what our mission needs today is not so much a large number of Brothers, but the witness of fidelity to God, fidelity to the Church, fidelity to our vows and fidelity to the mission. This is the rock on which our foundations rest. As Benedict XVI reminds us, “*The renewal of the Church is also achieved through the witness offered by the lives of believers*”.¹⁶ Our personal testimony is the crucial aspect of renewal that will be able to lighten the darkness of so many needy and lost people, pointing to the path to Jesus, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life (Jn 14,6).

Finally, with the General Government of the Order, the Community and the Co-workers of the General Curia I send you our very best wishes. We pray that the Holy Spirit will pour out His gifts in abundance upon on all of us at this critical time for our Hospitaller Family of Saint John of God as we prepare for our General Chapter. As Mary was at the center surrounded by Jesus disciples in the Upper Room praying for and receiving the Holy Spirit¹⁷ let us continue to implore her to interceded for our Chapter that it may be truly a ‘New Pentecost’ for our Family of Saint John of God. Let us pray Saint John of God and our saints and blessed Brothers to intercede for us and for all those, our brothers and sisters, who look to us for help at a time of vulnerability or need in their lives.

As always, fraternally yours in Saint John of God.



Brother Donatus Forkan
Prior General

N.B. Please ensure that each Brother receives a personal copy of this letter. Thank you.

¹⁶ Benedict XVI, Motu Proprio *Porta Fidei* (11.10.2011), 6.

¹⁷ Acts 1, 14