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*Priore Generale*

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## **FEAST OF ST JOHN OF GOD**

### **TO THE WHOLE ORDER.**

**Brothers, Co-workers, Volunteers, Benefactors and all those  
we serve through the Charism of Hospitality.**

My dear brothers and sisters in Hospitality,

#### *Preamble*

I am delighted to be able to address you once again on the occasion when the Hospitaller Family celebrates the Feast of our Founder, St. John of God. On this special occasion I would like to reflect with you on a number of aspects of the Feast of St. John of God, which occurs in the Church's liturgical calendar on March 8<sup>th</sup>. Because this year the Feast falls on a Sunday it will be celebrated liturgically on Saturday, March 7<sup>th</sup>. My first reflection will be on the life of John and what we can learn from it. Then there is the social aspect of the celebration or agape i.e. the sharing of the meal. Given that you, our Co-workers, are so intimately linked to the mission of the Order, I would like to share a few thoughts on the relationship that John of God had with his companion and very good friend Juan de Ávila or, as John nicknamed him, *Angulo*. Then, by way of conclusion, I would like to address a few words of encouragement to those whom we are privileged to serve through the charism or gift of Hospitality.

### *John of God – the man and his mission*

The more I reflect on the life of John of God, the more I am struck with wonder and admiration of the man. In the short space of twelve years John moved from being regarded as irrelevant by the people of Granada, to being regarded by those very same people, as *a saint*. They had judged him to be mentally unbalanced and, at best, to be avoided, or, at worst, to be ridiculed and marginalized. However, having come to know and understand John and his mission, the people of Granada not only changed their perception of him but cooperated with him and supported him in his work. In time they would give him the name by which we know him today – John **OF GOD**.

In my reflection I see in John an extraordinary humble and unassuming person. To endure what he endured, and to accomplish what he accomplished, John had to be a strong-minded and determined man. Following his conversion experience, John became very clearly focused on what he wished to do with the rest of his life. Having experienced the merciful love of the Lord, John was driven to give himself totally to others: to become hospitality for others. As we all know John was not a man of letters but a man of action. He was a man of the people, one who understood them, lived close to them and dedicated himself entirely to those of his brothers and sisters who were in greatest need.

When one looks at what John was able to achieve in the city of Granada, one is faced immediately by the question: How could any human person achieve what he was able to achieve against such odds? I believe that the way in which John of God overcame adversity can serve as model, or source of encouragement and inspiration, for people today who, because of the economic crisis, have lost their jobs or have had their life's earnings reduced to almost nothing. John shows what a human being is capable of, he never gave up – even when he was shackled in a cell of the Royal Hospital of Granada and treated like an animal. He fought back with a renewed energy that came from deep inside him. He was forced by the terrible experience that he lived through as a person diagnosed as mentally ill to ask deep questions about himself and about life and its purpose. John gradually came to understand that there existed a bigger plan in which he was to play a role. The guidance of his spiritual director, Father John of Avila, made clearer the role that John was to play in bringing God's plan to fruition. John followed the promptings and guidance of the Holy Spirit, working through people and events, and began to bring the poor and abandoned sick of the city to the doorway of the dwelling of the Venegas family. In this doorway John and his fellow 'outcasts', whom he cared for as would have cared for Jesus himself, came to know and experience the "utter fullness of God" (Eph 3: 19).

### *A man for our time*

John came to realize how fickle human beings are and how material things can be lost or taken away from one overnight. His loss of material things as well as his reputation, dignity and place in society left him vulnerable and naked in the eyes of the world. With his new mission John received the spiritual resources that would enable him to accomplish his

mission. However, he would depend on the people of Granada to supply him with the material and economic resources that he needed to fulfill his mission. One can only assume that had John known what that mission would entail in terms of personal sacrifice, and what he would accomplish in his own life time, and that what he began in Granada would spread like a great fire across the world, he would have readily agreed with the citizens of Granada, that humanly speaking, it just could not happen. But with John's new mission came a new identify and the audacity to believe that with God's grace nothing is impossible and that "I can do all things in Him who strengthens me." (Phil. 4: 13)

Furthermore, John no longer cared what people might think of him. He had found a new direction in life. John also received the precious insight, or grace, to understand that this was not **his** mission, but a part of God's plan for his people in which he was going to be an active partner. He was going to become an instrument of God that would affect positively the lives of not just the citizens of Granada but, through his followers, including you and me, the lives of countless millions of suffering and needy people down through the centuries. Through his fidelity John would manage to transform the life of a whole city. Without preaching from a pulpit or shouting from the podium of a political party he successfully managed to spread his thoughts and his vision of the future.

#### *The secret of John's success*

The secret of John's success is revealed in his biography where we see that, thanks to his enduring encounter with the living and ever-present Lord, God's mercy worked through him as he became its channel. His relationship with God was therefore not only expressed in a 'vertical' direction, but spread out widely to others, and particularly to his poor, sick and abandoned brothers and sisters, for whom he **became** hospitality.

The amazing closeness of God to all his sons and daughters, especially in their time of need, was made visible through John. On his death all the inhabitants of the city turned out to attend his funeral in order to demonstrate publicly their gratitude and the great respect they had for this man whom they had come to know and love. They proclaimed the positive influence that he had had on their lives as individuals and on their city. The presence of John and his ministry transformed the city of Granada from a godless, reckless and materialistic city to a more human and caring one.

#### *An annual "Day of the Co-worker"?*

When we look closely at John's life we are prompted by his example and work to ask ourselves the question: How did he manage to attract the people who joined him in his life project? There immediately springs to mind the episode in the Gospel when Jesus' first disciples joined him. Even without saying a word it was as if John was urging them, as Jesus had urged his disciples, to "come and see" (Jn 1, 35-39).

In this connection I would like to recall the man who was one of John of God's closest associates, Juan de Ávila – *Angulo*. It was John's goodness that attracted Angulo to him, his way of "doing good" to others, in an absolute and wholly comprehensive way. In a word, his hospitality. Angulo earned John's unconditional trust. In his letters John left no doubt that Angulo was his faithful travelling companion. They became the kind of friends that could chide one another as we see them doing during the journey on which they escorted some ex-prostitutes to Toledo. The late Brother Matias de Mina who studied the life and family of Angulo in the archives of Granada concluded that, "*If John of God is the prototype of the Brother and Angulo is the prototype of the Co-worker, then their [amicable] relationship must be the prototype of the one between Brothers and Co-workers today.*"

Because I place great importance on the circular letter that I send out annually for the feast of our father and founder I began drafting this letter early in the year. Consequently I was already thinking a lot about John of God and his conversion experience in Granada on January 20<sup>th</sup> when I noticed that January 19<sup>th</sup> was the anniversary of the death in 1583 of his close friend and co-worker Angulo.

Father José Maria Javierre, in his account of the life of John of God, '*John of God – Loco in Granada*' (1996), tells us that in his apostolate in Granada John engaged the services of a paid helper – "*a young man to accompany him in the street and to mind the house during his absence. One who was trustworthy and reliable and who stayed with him to the very end. His name was Juan de Ávila which, by coincidence, was the same name as Master Ávila. To avoid any confusion, John gave him the nickname 'Angulo' ... we do not know the reason for the choice of this nickname nor whether others, besides John, called him Angulo. He had just turned 30 when, in 1544, he first came to know our John and entered his service; he was a bachelor at this time but he married a few years later in the spring of 1549. John of God took him on as 'a salaried worker', not as a disciple. He enjoyed the absolute confidence of his employer, as we will see in notable circumstances. John referred to Angulo affectionately as "my companion" and they became great friends. He was an exemplary employee and deserved to be called John's friend.*" (Cfr. Ch. 26)

We know from his own words something of Angulo's experience of John of God. He says: "*I took part in the work of John of God from 1544 for six years before his death. John was a man of great patience and holy life and he went about the city dressed in clothing of rough material with a hood and in bare feet. He carried a basket over his shoulder and begged alms for the love of God. People gave these to him and he passed them on to the poor whom he looked after at his hospital in the street called Gomeles. By my best memory, I was twenty-eight years old, more or less, when I first saw John of God going about the city begging for alms using his own particular catch cry. I myself lived in the hospital and I saw everything of which I am speaking with my own eyes. Soon after I first met him, John bought a house, which was a former nuns' convent with a well of its own in Gomeles Street for four hundred ducats. The generosity of many gentlefolk of the city had made the purchase of the house possible. Later on, John of God built a kitchen on to the house and carried out other*

*repairs that cost an additional four hundred ducats. He did all this by means of donations that also enabled him to install beds and put in nurses. He bought everything that was necessary for the service of the poor. He had a chaplain who heard confessions and administered the sacraments and conducted funerals before the deceased were interred.”*

Angulo married Beatriz de Ayvar on the 14<sup>th</sup> of May 1549, less than a year before John's death, and the couple had four children. It is important to note that Angulo's commitment to Hospitality was not personalised in John of God, and he remained part of the John-of-God movement for the many years that elapsed between John's death and his own. Angulo's relationship with John lasted six years. His relationship with the Brothers lasted another 33 years.

If the Order were ever to designate a date as the annual “Day of the Co-worker”, 19 January would seem to be a good choice.

*Time to reflect and ask some questions!*

As with any activity repetition can deprive the event of real meaning. This can apply even to liturgical feasts of the Church e.g. Christmas, Easter and – for us – the Feast of St. John of God. The annual Feast of St. John of God provides us, John's followers, with the opportunity to reflect on his life and the mission that he bequeathed to us. I see this annual celebration as an opportunity to renew our commitment to the continuation of John's work in the spirit and the manner that he has shown us. I believe preparation for the Feast could be a time to reflect at a deeper level on the life and work of St. John of God so that we can become more familiar with his spirituality. We might also like to ask ourselves some questions like: *Why did the Lord see fit to send this man, this exemplary figure of a Saint, among us?* We might reflect also on the reason why we joined ourselves to the Hospitaller Family and, perhaps more importantly, *the reason why we have stayed as a Brother or a Co-worker?* As a Co-worker mused at a recent conference, we might ask the question, *Where is John of God today?* In a practical, personal, way we might like to ask ourselves the following question: *In my particular situation what would John of God do?* A final thought in this regard, *In these difficult times for so many people, what would John of God's response be?*

*A time to remember*

In keeping with what John of God would wish and God's purpose in giving him to us as a model, I believe that the celebration of the Feast of St. John of God should be much more than a purely external or material celebration. It is, in my view, a wonderful opportunity for us to explore the truth which this liturgical celebration offers us.

A question often asked by people is, Why do we have certain people declared saints? Without going into a deep theological explanation, the more I have reflected on this over the years and in particular as I reflect on the lives of people like John of God, Benedict Menni, Olallo Valdés and Eustachio Kugler and others, I have come to the conclusion that God in

his mercy and wisdom, knowing how difficult life can be for us, has given us men and women who serve as models for us on our journey through life. For me John of God is not just a model to follow as I endeavor to live out my vocation in life, but a companion, a friend and an advocate on my journey.

### *The person we serve at the centre of the celebrations*

Celebrations, by their nature, are social events that bring people together. We have a long tradition that on the Feast of St. John of God we try to provide something special or different for the people whom we are privileged to serve in our centers or through the services that we provide. For this reason, when we visit one of our Centers or Services on March 8<sup>th</sup> or whenever the Feast of St. John of God is celebrated, it is wonderful to see our *guests* experiencing companionship, enjoying nice food, music and even dancing or whatever events they are capable of or wish to participate in.

Celebrations are also an expression of the hospitality of St. John of God. For a short time at least the people who come to us because of an illness or some other need in their lives are able to set aside their particular concerns and worries and enjoy themselves. I am sure the sight of people, who otherwise may be feeling depressed or preoccupied with their particular need or illness, enjoying themselves gives John of God great pleasure.

I spent Christmas with our community in China where the Order has a hospice for people who are terminally ill, usually from cancer. Here too we had a party for the staff and clients on Christmas Eve. As the people were very sick, and on particular diets according to their need, special food was not required but each client received a nicely wrapped gift. One very sick man mused, with a tears in his eyes, this is the first time in my life that anyone ever gave me a present. He lovingly embraced his wife who had presented him with the gift given to her by a Co-worker for her husband. At the threshold of death this man was able to experience the hospitality of St. John of God unaware that in a very short time (he died some days later) he would be in the presence of the God of Hospitality who would offer him the gift of eternal life, which is the great gift of Christmas. Similar acts of hospitality are enacted every moment of every day wherever the Order has a presence as its membership strives to be true to the mission entrusted to them by reaching out to the most vulnerable and needy brothers and sisters in our midst to bring them healing, joy, the hope of a better future, understanding and respect in a welcoming and caring environment.

### *Heroes of Hospitality*

As human beings we are always seeking people to look up to as examples; people who can motivate us and support us in our apostolate. Young people especially have their football, baseball, cricket or tennis heroes or heroines whom they 'worship! As I stated earlier, Angulo is a great model for the Co-worker, he was so close to John of God, sharing the way he worked and acted and continuing John's work together with the Brothers long after John had died. We also have our Saints and Blessed Brothers, like our recently beatified Brother Olallo Valdés who for 54 years tirelessly performed his apostolate, and even remained

completely alone for 10 long years. Brother Olallo remained faithful to his hospitaller vocation, to the Church and to his mission, and never neglected his prayer life. It is hardly a coincidence, then, that he too, like the man he emulated with such precision, John of God, became known as the “apostle of charity”.

This year we shall have the joy of celebrating another beatification in Regensburg, Bavaria, Germany. This time it will be Brother Eustachio Kugler. Brother Eustachio is another edifying example that the vocation of the Brother in the Church, when lived with the fidelity and perseverance, leads to holiness. The beatification of Brother Eustachio is further confirmation that the seed sown by John of God has borne great spiritual fruit in those who have since joined his project to put into practice the Gospel of Mercy. Brother Eustachio had great compassion for the poor and the sick, particularly for those suffering from a variety of mental disorders or disabilities. In his prayers he committed himself totally to God, and in his sincere veneration of the Lord and Our Lady he reiterated his desire to love his neighbor as he loved God. He lived the spirit of the Beatitudes to the full, becoming the bearer of the Good News.

*A special message to all those we serve through the Charism of Hospitality*

On this Feast of St. John of God, whom the Church has declared Patron Saint of all those who are suffering and those who care for them, I address my final words in this letter to all those who find themselves in a St. John of Centre or availing of a service provided by the Order for whatever reason. If you are very ill or suffering from a long-term illness or disability, you may be finding it difficult to pray. In this case, your suffering accepted as best you can, is your prayer – and a very powerful prayer. I realise that in the face of human misery and suffering, the best words of comfort do not explain suffering away; but they do proclaim the good news that Christ has borne our sickness and endured our suffering. Christ is with you therefore in your suffering, offering healing to hearts that may very well feel broken and lonely at times.

The Brothers and Co-workers who care for you, or accompany you in your time of need, want very much to relieve your pain, soothe your troubled soul or reduce the anxiety that builds up inside sometimes. They are there to help and support you and your family and friends who, because of your illness or disability, are also hurting, concerned and requiring a word of comfort and hope.

Furthermore, I would like you to know that each day the Brothers of St. John of God in their more than 200 religious communities across the world remember you and your needs in a special way when they gather in their chapel to pray,. They offer your pain, your feelings and longings, your desire for healing and wholeness to the Lord asking for his blessing on you, for healing courage and strength for you and your loved ones. The Brothers do this in a particular way as they gather around the altar to celebrate the Eucharist and also in their individual or private prayer. We see this as a very important expression of the hospitality that we profess. As we are an international religious institute, spread across all five continents in more than 50 countries, you can be assured that night and day in some part of

the world you, your needs and the longings of your heart are remembered by the Brothers. I hope this thought gives you some spiritual comfort.

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion let us entrust ourselves, heart and soul, to Mary our Mother of Good Counsel, and through the intercession of St John of God let us ask our Lord to guide our steps and our daily work, always for the good of those who turn to us to place themselves in our care at times of special need.

Finally, I am joined by the General Government of the Order and the Co-workers and Community at the General Curia, Rome, in sending to all the members of the great Hospitaller Family of St. John of God, our fraternal and prayerful best wishes for the Feast of St. John of God.

I remain, as always, yours very sincerely in St. John of God.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Donatus Forkan o.h.", written in a cursive style.

Br. Donatus Forkan, o.h.  
Prior General