

THE HOSPITALER ORDER OF ST JOHN OF GOD

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## ST JOHN OF GOD'S ETHICS

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## INTRODUCTION

Ethics in general, and bioethics in particular, are acquiring increasing prominence in the lives of individuals and institutions, particularly those, like our own, which are dedicated in various ways and from various points of view to caring for the sick and the most vulnerable members of our society.

The reason for this is certainly the fact that conflicts of values, or at least our awareness of them, is increasing all the time. There is no doubt that humanity is experiencing huge advances in every sphere of life – personal, social, scientific and many others. And there is equally no doubt that we are living in a world fraught with contradictions, where poverty, hunger, sickness, violence and many other things never cease to shock us. And all of them constantly raise questions, and demand coherent responses which we are not always capable of making.


The Hospitaller Order of Saint John of God is very sensitive to the world in which we live today, and is endeavouring to address the ethical and bioethical conflicts that arise every day in our Centres, and in society at large, applying the ethos and philosophy we have enshrined in our Charter of Hospitality.

Saint John of God founded our Order and is the source of our inspiration. In the social, cultural and religious environment in which he lived, he succeeded in addressing the ethical conflicts which emerged, with great simplicity, but also with great consistency and depth, thanks to his disinterested self-giving to, and love for others, and to his deep-seated human and Christian convictions.

This is why we felt that it would be interesting to reflect on and study the specific ethos by which John of God lived, and which he practised in his age. It is a topic that has not been very thoroughly studied in the past, and it will help us to gain a better understanding of him and give us new key ideas to enable us to respond to the ethical and bioethical conflicts that the world is facing today.

I would like to thank the General Bioethics Commission for having taken this initiative, and particularly Dr Salvino Leone, the author of this work with the help of the Commission.

I trust that the document will prove useful for the whole of our Institution, and in particular for the formation of all the members of the Saint John of God Family.



Bro. Donatus Forkan  
Prior General

# ST JOHN OF GOD'S ETHICS

The ethical dimension and implications<sup>1</sup> of St John of God's work are particularly important issues that have been studied very little in the past in terms of the history and the foundation of the Order, but they have become more urgently necessary today for practical and operational purposes. For it is no coincidence that the Order's *Charter of Hospitality* devotes two whole chapters, and various paragraphs in other chapters, specifically to the ethical aspects, accounting for almost one-half of the whole document.<sup>2</sup>

Yet very few studies have been conducted specifically addressing this topic in particular. The International Bioethics Commission therefore considered it essential to systematically reflect on the origins of John of God's ethics, and the main forms it has taken, and its developments, across the ages looking ahead to the forms it has taken today. For returning to one's own roots means drinking at the very sources of one's identity.

## 1. THE SOURCES

The source of John of God's ethics is obviously the Saint's biographies, although not all of them have the same historical and documentary value.

**1.1. *The Letters.*** These are certainly our main source, because they are the only authentic documents which directly reflect the thinking of St John of God himself. Written, more to be more precise dictated, by him, they express his feelings exactly as he conceived and experienced them, and handed them on to his correspondents. One of the most important Letters for our purposes here is the Third Letter to the Duchess of Sessa, for its stylistic features and substance make it almost a kind of short catechesis on fundamental ethical principles. It almost certainly reflects the specific teachings he had learned and handed on, or even transcribed. Obviously this does not place its authorship in doubt, for

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<sup>1</sup> There is no common agreement on the presumed distinction between *morality* and *ethics* which became common after Hegel. In his *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel said that morality had to do with the subjective aspect of behaviour (the intention of the actor, the interior attitude, etc) whereas ethiccity comprised all the historically realised moral values. More commonly, influenced by his thought, there are many who reduce morality to the mere subjective dimension of action, and ethics to the objective study of values. Others emphasise the term 'ethics' as being originally more philosophical (Aristotelian) than *morality*, which is viewed as a borrowing from theology, to which it often implicitly refers. In this paper, following the prevalent use in our philosophical and theological tradition, these two terms will be employed interchangeably, using them separately only where this is semantically, but not conceptually, a more appropriate usage.

<sup>2</sup> In particular: 4.1 (*The dignity of the human person*); 4.2 (*Respect for human life*); 5.2 (*Specific problems of our care work*) which take up the main bioethical issues: sexuality, procreation, euthanasia, transplantation, trials, etc.

this is evidenced from the many biographical elements the Letter contains (his reference to the foundlings that the Duchess wished to take in, John of God's sickness, words once spoken to him at Cabra, entrusting matters to Angulo in the event of his death, etc). The ethical-catechetical part of the Letter can be summed up in a specific didactic scheme as follows:

- the theological values,
- the cardinal values,
- duties to God,
- the use of time,
- meditation on the latest events.

**1.2. *His biography.*** Virtually the only bibliographical account we have is the first one written in 1585 by Francisco de Castro, the Rector – the equivalent to today's Chaplain – of the Granada Hospital.<sup>3</sup> The biography was written thirty years after John's death, drawing on the eyewitness accounts of people who had personally known him, which Castro very carefully discerned in his book. Employing a critical spirit typical of a modern historian, Castro said that he had written "only what it was possible to know with great certainty and truth", and that he had "left out anything that was not very safe, leaving the prudent reader free to infer the rest from what has been written. For it is better to leave much more to be said, than to recount things which are not very reliable".

**1.3. *The testimonies at the Process of Beatification.*** From the point of view of historical documentation the most reliable sources are the testimonies given at the Beatification Process. They were not published until 2006, by José Luis Martínez, and they offer a great deal of documentation into which scholars can delve deeply to discover more about the man, John of God. They are often repetitive, because they were the replies given by the witnesses to standard questions put to them, but they nevertheless provide a more historically accurate picture of John of God's religious, spiritual and – of relevance to our purposes here – ethical profile.

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<sup>3</sup> This was followed by other biographies as we know, the first of which was by Bro. Dionisio Celi, the Prior of the Granada Hospital, who considered that Castro's short work did not contain sufficient biographical details (and also because he had been asked to write the book by various eyewitnesses). He agreed to do so, but accepted uncritically many episodes about the life of the Saint, which were either legendary or not adequately documented. When the questioning had been completed for the process of Beatification, the Apostolic Visitor and Ambassador of Philip II, the Augustinian friar Antonio de Govea, wrote a new biography, which then became the one most commonly used. Because of its historical and documentary value, however, Castro's biography, which was only discovered after the 16<sup>th</sup> century, is a fundamental reference work on which we have drawn here in this examination of the Saint's life from the ethical point of view, where necessary supplementing it with information from other biographical sources.

In order to perform a moral assessment based on the documentary sources available to us, I think we can safely say that his Third Letter to the Duchess of Sessa was the fundamental account of the moral *attitude* of John of God, while the other letters addressed his *conduct*. This distinction, which is quite common today in moral theology, links the moral value of the actions we perform to the malice of human acts, and hence biblically to the very "heart" of Man. Morality percolates down, fundamentally and as a matter of priority, to our moral "attitude", that is to say in the deepest sense of the term, of our acts, in their relationship with our being and our desire to act well. From this follows the conduct which is ordinarily visible, while not necessarily being a manifestation of morality. For example, the famous widow's mite in the Gospel story (Mk 12, 41-44; Lk 21, 1-4) might seem – in behavioural terms – to have been an act of stinginess, whereas in terms of her attitude, it was the expression of immense generosity. Conversely, a generous amount given in alms for the sole purpose of attracting people's admiration may appear, in terms of the conduct itself, to be a good action, whereas in terms of attitude behind it, it is an act of pride and vanity. Obviously, when we do not know a persons' interior disposition it is impossible to judge the attitudes, and only the conduct can therefore be judged.

Turning to St John of God, the Letters, and more particularly the Third Letter to the Duchess of Sessa, provide us with a glimpse of his interior world as he himself handed it on in his correspondence, while the biographical testimonies talk about the specific acts he performed stemming from that conduct.

**1.4. *The lawsuit against the Jeronymites.*** There is one further, and perhaps not sufficiently explored, historical source: the case papers in the lawsuit which, after John's death, the Hospitaller Brothers brought against the Order of the Jeronymites on whose land the new hospital had been built. The most interesting aspect of this documentation, which was published in 1995 by José Sánchez Martínez, is the picture it offers of the care provided in Granada in John's day, and the distinctive features of the new style of care he had introduced.<sup>4</sup>

**1.5. *Letters of St John of Avila.*** St John of Avila, whose preaching converted St John of God was also his spiritual director. Only three of the letters he wrote to John of God are extant.<sup>5</sup> but it is quite likely that there were many more. Neither do we have any of the letters written to him by St John of God. But in

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<sup>4</sup> The details can be reconstructed thanks to the publication of the case papers: J. Sánchez-Martínez, *Kenosis-diakonia en el itinerario espiritual de San Juan de Dios*, Madrid 1995. Bro. Giuseppe Magliozzi provided a good summary in his book *"Lo firmo con queste mie tre lettere"*, Hospitaller Order Library, Rome 1996.

<sup>5</sup> The original texts were published by L. Sala Balust and F. Martín Hernández (eds.) in: *Obras completas del Beato Juan de Avila*, BAC, Madrid 1970-1971 (6 vols.).

those we do have we can extract some of the typical features of John of God's spirituality and also his ethics. Unfortunately these very few letters were only written after John's conversion. But, as we know from the biography by Govea, following his release from the Royal Hospital in Granada, St John of God went to Montilla where he found Master Avila and stayed with him for about a month. It is certainly a period of intense preparation and it is therefore not unlikely that some of the typical features of his apostolate date back precisely to that period. But there remain no written traces of what some people believe they can detect in the works of St John of Avila, particularly his *Audi Filia*.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. THE ORIGINS

One aspect that has not been thoroughly addressed in St John of God studies has to do with the origins of his moral proposal. For it has always been taken for granted that it was merely the result and consequence of the way he expressed his vocation to serve the sick, the poor and needy in general. In reality, its origins were more complex, rooted in certain aspects of the religious environment of his age. Simplifying somewhat, we might say that there were four main cultural patterns.

**2.1 Catechetical instruction.** As already indicated, the Third Letter to the Duchess of Sessa certainly contains a clear catechetical instruction from the Saint. But what were the sources of religious teaching available to him in his day? In other words, how and from where had John learned the things he wrote in this Letter (and also in the others, to a certain extent)?

16th century Spain played a very important role with regard to catechetical instruction, both because the bishops were particularly sensitive to this matter and because of the influence of the Salamanca school of theology.<sup>7</sup> In earlier centuries, various synods of the Spanish Churches had recommended the pastors responsible for the care of souls to provide religious instruction to the people (the Council of Valladolid, 1322, the Council of Toledo, 1323, the Synod

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<sup>6</sup> The book takes its title from the Latin *incipit* of Psalm 45, 11 *Audi filia et vide et inclina aurem tuam et obliviscere populum tuum et domum patris tui* and is a text on spirituality which was already circulating in manuscript form as early as 1533, and was subsequently published for the first time in 1556 unbeknown to the author. He subsequently edited this second edition which was published after his death in 1574. A summary of the possible correlations between certain passages from this text and St John of God's spirituality has been made by G. Magliozzi in: *S. Giovanni di Dio: Lettere* (edited by G. Magliozzi and S. Izzo), Curia Generalizia FBF, Roma 1981, which also contains an Italian version of the Letters. In Italy, the publishing house Edizioni San Paolo recently published the text in full (San Giovanni D'Avila, *Audi filia*, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo 2010).

<sup>7</sup> For all this part, see G. Alcamo, *Prime realizzazioni di catechismi "strutturati" tra il '400 e il '500* (Palermo 2009, unpublished, with the author's kind consent).

of Cuellar-Segovia, 1325, the Synod of Pamplona, 1354, the Synod of Salamanca, 1410). But it was only with the Council of Tortosa in 1429 that a structure was proposed, very closely resembling the form of today's catechisms. Furthermore, canon VI of that Council requested the bishops to commission competent people to draw up a brief compendium of all the essential tenets of the Christian faith and customs. It may well have been St John of Avila who provided a short summary to St John of God, who, in turn, passed it on to the Duchess of Sessa.

When the Salamanca edition of the *Constitutions of the Toledo Archdiocese* (1498) was published, an appendix was added by Cardinal Cisneros and adopted by the Synod sponsored by the Archbishop of Granada, Hernando de Talavera (1498), specifying that it was necessary to teach the sign of the cross, the Our Father, the Hail Mary, the Apostles' Creed, and the Salve Regina. This almost seems to echo what John wrote in his First Letter to the Duchess of Sessa: "When you are about to retire for the night, make the sign of the Cross, renewing your faith by reciting the Creed, the Our Father, the Hail Mary and the Salve Regina".

Subsequently, at the Seville Provincial Council (1512) the Dominican priest, Fr Diego de Deza, ordered all the parish churches to publish a table setting out a summary of Catholic doctrine (faith, the sacraments, sins, virtues, etc.) ensuring that it was clearly visible to everyone. This "Dominican imprint", if we can define it in this way, can perhaps also be seen from John's description of the cardinal virtues, which explained them analytically in terms of the Commandments, as was the custom in the Dominican educational system, following St Thomas Aquinas. Moreover, the Dominican theological school was the main one in Spain at the time, with such men as Francisco de Vitoria (1492-1546), Melchior Cano (1509-1560), Bartolomé de Medina (1527-1580).<sup>8</sup> Despite a certain split between the academic teachings and the preaching to the masses, we must not underestimate the influence of the former over the latter.

**2.2 *The pre-Conciliar climate.*** St John of God's ethical and pastoral care not only derived from the direct sources of oral teaching, whatever they might have been. In his Spain, as in many other European countries, the first stirrings were already being felt of demands for reform, that were later to lead to the Protestant Reformation and to the Catholic Counter-Reformation. The essential features of this new religious climate are also evidenced from St John of God's own experience,<sup>9</sup> namely:

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<sup>8</sup> R. Gerardi, *Storia della morale*, Ed. Dehoniane, Bologna 2003, 225-235.

<sup>9</sup> G. Martina, *Storia della Chiesa*, Ut Unum sint, Roma 1980, 247-248.

- *The reform of the ancient Religious Orders, and the founding of new Institutes.* In many of these, “splits” occurred, with some members breaking away, demanding greater rigour in applying and enforcing the Rule (among the Franciscans there was the breakaway movement of the Observants from the Conventuals, with the birth of the Capuchin branch; among the Benedictines, the reform of the Congregation of S. Justina, etc). They embarked on a process of creativity and renewal of the Religious Life which was to culminate in the Counter-Reformation with the founding of new Orders. St John of God was also part of this climate, for as everyone knows, even though the historiography of the past claimed that he had never envisaged setting up a Religious family as such, this is belied by what we know from his Life: “a person who was devoted to him, said that John of God had sometimes said that there would be many others wearing his habit who would serve the poor throughout the world”.<sup>10</sup>
- *Lay spirituality movements leading to modern devotion.* This is a reference to a wide-ranging movement running throughout Europe after the 14th century laying the foundations of its identity in the form of secular spirituality based on the Imitation of Christ, which became the benchmark text. This Movement also laid great stress on the intimate and affective components of the Religious Life. It was probably in this climate, too, that St John of God was immersed, evidenced above all from the birth of a typically lay movement without any desire or demand for clericalisation, that occurred, in part, only in the centuries that followed.<sup>11</sup> Secondly, his particular and intimate devotion to the Passion and the desire he expressed and put into practice to follow Christ along the way of the Cross.
- *The reforming work of certain bishops.* Even before the Council of Trent had reformed the status of Bishops (requiring them to be resident, etc) in many dioceses, there were particularly enlightened bishops who were carrying through the reform of customs, but above all who were anxious to guarantee the instruction of the people, encouraging works of charity and so forth. In Spain, the most outstanding figures were Pedro González de Mendoza, the Primate of Spain at the end of the 15th century and promoter of a number of charitable works, Hernando de Talavera, the Archbishop of Granada in the same period, and the protagonist of the Synod which adopted the catechetical formulae

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<sup>10</sup> F. de Castro, *History of the Life and Holy Works of John of God, Granada 1585, Ch. XVIII* (Translation by Bro. Benedict O’Grady OH).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Fr D. Forkan, *The Changing Face of the Order*, letter on Renewal, Rome 2009, 11-12.



mentioned above, the Cardinal Archbishop of Toledo, Ximenes Cisneros (who died in 1517), who also translated the Imitation of Christ into Spanish – probably the edition that John of God would have read – and lastly the Bishop of Tuy, Miguel Muñóz, who clothed John of God with the habit.<sup>12</sup>

**2.3. His charismatic inspiration.** Lastly, let us not overlook his direct charismatic inspiration. If we admit that John of God's vocation was in response to a supernatural plan, we cannot attribute the beginnings of his mission of charity exclusively to contingent historical and cultural circumstances. This being so, we can identify four fundamental moments:

- *His conversion after hearing St John of Avila's sermon.* This was the moment in which John realised his true condition, and his desire or conversion-*metanoia*, that is to say the complete U-turn in his existence, his change of mentality, which at that particular moment had not yet become an existential reality. We should note that this phase, focusing (as it would later be, in another way, for Martin Luther) on the realisation of his sinfulness, was not specifically ethical but religious. Today, we tend to view sin mainly in terms of morality, by reference to a series of violations of an ethical code (the Commandments, virtues etc), whereas in reality the real significance of sin is essentially religious, by reference to a breakdown in relations with God (and one's fellow humans). However, it was this 'source', which marked a radical change in John's life, that would eventually trigger needs of an ethical character.
- *His vocation or maturity process inside Granada hospital.* During his stay in the psychiatric wing of the Granada Royal Hospital, John worked on his vocational choice with direct first-hand experience of the inhumane treatment meted out to the patients there. He prayed that God would let him have a "hospital" where he could look after them in his own way, as he wished, that is to say, with humaneness, humanity and love. That decision was certainly an important ethical one, and we might say that it was the beginning of his Hospitaller Charism, the moment in which God gave John that Charism, and through him, gifted it to the Church. His later care work would be unlike anything else being done by others (St Camillus de Lellis, St Vincent de Paul etc) who were dedicated to ministering to the sick, for John focused on treating them in a hospital environment, such that it would not only be the Hospitaller Charism to

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<sup>12</sup> This Bishop has traditionally been identified with Sebastián Ramírez, but according to the studies conducted by G. Magliozzi (*Pagine juandediane*, St John of God Studies Centre, Rome 1992, 161-167) this was not the case.

serve the sick, but the Charism of *hospitality*. At the ethical level, the specific dimension of this virtue therefore mingles and crosses with that specific charismatic dimension in John.

- *His journey to Guadalupe*. Quite apart from the actual historical details of his journey as it has been handed down almost in legendary fashion, it did have a dual significance. The first, which was purely religious and devotional, was to pray to Our Lady and to place the work on which he was about to embark under her protection. But the second one, which is less well known and has been investigated much less, was purely pragmatic, because he went to the Shrine of Our Lady to look at the hospital that had been built in the annexed monastery. In the Gothic cloister, a hospital had been installed with an annexed pharmacy and a medical school. In addition to this, they had also set up seven hospitals in the environs, to treat the sick people in the surrounding villages.

During his stay, John was therefore able to see:

- The staff, of about 20 healthcare and auxiliary personnel,
  - the state-of-the-art medical instruments used at that time (drills, pincers, dentistry tools, etc),
  - a well-furnished pharmacy containing many medicines obtained from plants, which the friars cultivated themselves,
  - the way the physicians examined and dealt with the patients,
  - the medical lessons given to the trainees.<sup>13</sup>
- *The beginning of his care work in Granada*. "He really wanted to do something practical to make the poor well and happy." This is the way Castro begins his description of John of God's care work in Granada. It was the final, definitive and irreversible charismatic phase which was to put an end to his many life experiences and to his long quest to discover his true vocation. Historians disagree on his very first facility into which he admitted his sick guests. It was probably the vestibule of Don Miguel Venegas's house, and only later the famous house in Calle Lucena. But the fact remains that the beginning of his charitable mission was marked, and would remain so until the very end, by the hospitality he showed towards the needy. His ethical choice had been translated into tangible outreach and welcome. It was precisely this decidedly pragmatic value which characterised his work. Neither should we forget

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<sup>13</sup> J. María Javierre, Juan de Dios, loco en Granada, Sígueme, Salamanca 1996, ch. 21. The author has taken this summary from a wide-ranging bibliography (354-355).

that, particularly in Protestant Christianity, moral theology, pastoral theology and catechesis etc, are defined, with good reason, as “practical theology”.

### 3. THE SUBSTANCE

Turning now to an analysis of the actual substance of John of God's ethics we will draw a distinction, based on the modern categories of moral theology, between fundamental ethics and special ethics, and then move on to a more detailed analysis of both.

**3.1. *Fundamental morality.*** We can fit this into the framework of the modern ethical paradigms of moral action evidencing the benchmark values, the resultant ethical rules and the way John acquired them in practical terms.

- *Values.* These are the fundamental realities that exist in the moral universe, the objective, and hence universal and unchangeable, place of "goodness" in itself. These values are not always fully known and they are mostly perceived differently by different individuals, and in different ages and cultures, but this does not mean that they cease to be the absolute benchmark and standard of morality. The types of values range widely and listing them by way of example cannot be done exhaustively (spiritual, material, intellectual, effective, social values and so on). And they are also ranked hierarchically in a manner that is not only structured according to their ontological importance (for example spiritual values as being paramount to material values) but also their priority in terms of applying them to deal with emergencies and according to possibilities.

In some respects the fundamental "source/core" value in the life of St John of God, in my opinion, was "seeking the good of others in a state of need". Need of any kind (not only financial but also spiritual) was what drove John into action. To a certain extent we might say that he had a holistic view of need, not drawing any particular distinction between the need for a better existence (the example of prostitutes) and giving alms to the poor he met in the streets, or between looking after the sick and taking in foundlings. For him, this value became an ethical demand of fundamental importance from which all his conduct stemmed. Even when it was actually impossible (because of a lack of money, or debt, or a lack of adequate accommodation space, or a shortage of co-workers, physical exhaustion, adverse environmental conditions, or a threat to his

own safety, and so on) he never held back from trying to meet the needs of others.

- *Standards and rules.* The moral rule is nothing more than the translation of the value into a historical context. For it remains a pure abstraction unless it is put into practice, and this is done through rules and standards. Unlike a value, the rule can change, precisely because it is embodied in history and its application may therefore be problematic. This raises the whole problem of who sets the moral rules, what binding force they have, and what relationship exists between the rule and the value. There are immediate rules (what in English is called *prima facie duties*), namely, rules that have never been formally promulgated but are known to all, such as how to help someone who is about to fall over or is in difficulties. Then there are larger and shared moral principles (such as the four major principles of bioethics: autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence and justice.); universal attestations of ethical approval (such as the major "Charters" of Rights, and international ethical Conventions, like the Oviedo Convention etc.); religious codes (like the Commandments or the teachings of the Magisterium, many of which are intended to be universal in scope, and not only limited to the followers of a particular religion). As for legislative rules, even though they should have an ethical substrate, this is not always the case (such as racial laws, or laws permitting voluntary abortion).
- We can say that the translation of the values professed by St John of God into rules comprises all the components of ethical rule-setting giving absolute and paramount priority to those linked to religious rule-setting. For in one of his Letters, John of God said, "Believe in everything Holy Mother Church believes and professes, *keeping her precepts and putting them into practice*".<sup>14</sup> Keeping (*guardar*) and putting into practice (*poner en obra*) are the two key-words because they refer to the knowledge of the Church's rules, and the conduct that follows from this knowledge. But the "precepts" must not be downplayed in the way this seems to have been done in the St Pius X Catechism, as the "5 general precepts of the Church", for they refer to all the operational rules resulting from the Church's teaching.

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<sup>14</sup> 3 DS, 37. In this reference, the numbering used in the Letters of St John of God follows the Order's official Spanish version in the *editio typica*. (J.I. Fernández de Viana *et al.*, *Cartas de San Juan de Dios*, Fundación Juan Ciudad, Madrid 2006). When citing the letters of St John of God, the numbering given is taken from the edition edited by F. de Viana, giving their paleographic and diplomatic version, then the personal version by M. de Mina, who was very familiar with the Saint. I may therefore consider this to be their *editio typica*, which is why I have used this text as my source (J.I. Fernández de Viana *et al.*, *Cartas de San Juan se Dios*, Fundación Juan Ciudad, Madrid 2006) *Emphasis added*.

- *Conscience*. This is the decision-making "locus" of moral action and its "proximate norm".<sup>15</sup> As such it also marks the transition from the objectivity of the value and the universality of the norm to the subjectivity and the individuality of conscience. The same act performed by different persons takes on a different moral significance, just as goodness and evil actions do not depend on formal obedience to the moral norm but on their responsible reception by conscience. This, in the final analysis, is what determines the specific evil of moral transgression. Conscience is therefore the place of "moral discernment" *par excellence*, a place for the individual to reflect on in this situation. This entails comparing all the values at issue, together with their priority relations (poverty, urgency, possibility), and all the various norms and resultant duties with possible conflicts between them, identifying once again the priority criteria; lastly, one has to decide with "a clean conscience" on a given action and then effectively reappraise it retrospectively to understand more appropriately, also in light of the outcomes, whether one has "done the right thing".

The whole of St John of God's life was driven by his conscience, determined as he was to act for the good of others. Behind every decision he took there was no affirmation of values or any formal attestation of obedience to normal morality, but there was always a strong commitment to his conscience. This can be seen more clearly in some excerpts from his Letters, and in episodes in his life which attest to his capacity for "moral discernment", as the typical product of an enlightened conscience.

In his Letter to Luis Bautista, we read, "When you come to the house of God [...] *recognise both good and evil*".<sup>16</sup> This attitude (*sepáis conocer el mal y el bien*) is the typical act of conscience which must discern between good and evil and then act for the good. Another well-known episode in his biography has to do with his stay at the Royal Court which in those days was in Valladolid, in order to make a direct request to the King to provide financial support for his charitable work in Granada. And it was that during his stay at the Court that he collected many alms both from the King and from his daughters, but paradoxically instead of keeping the money for his care work in his hospital he distributed the money to the poor people in the city.

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<sup>15</sup> cf. John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* 59.

<sup>16</sup> LB, 42-43.

"He did this exceedingly well, going to look for these poor men and women in their own dwellings and giving them food just as he had been used to doing in Granada.

"Seeing him going about Valladolid distributing food and alms, someone who knew him said to him, 'Brother John of God, why don't you save the money and take it back to your own poor folk at Granada?' To this he replied, 'Brother, giving it away here or giving it away at Granada, the same good is done for God who is everywhere.'<sup>17</sup>

What might appear to have been poor stewardship was in reality the expression of creativity of conscience which, faced with the immediacy of a particular need, saw a different priority, and caused him to change his mind.

**3.2. *Special morality.*** This, according to modern systematic moral theology, is the "categorical declination" of a fundamental choice, namely, the breakdown of ethics into different operational spheres. We therefore distinguish between religious, family, sexual, social and other types of morality.

**3.2.1. *Individual morality.*** This is certainly the broadest and most complex area that we can identify in the life and writings of St John of God. It is expressed in terms of the "ethics of the virtues". In moral theology, virtue is a *habitus*, that is to say, personal aptitude to do good in a given field. As such, it is halfway between two extreme opposites (by defect and by excess): *in medio stat virtus*. In an 'ascending' sense, moreover, there is no limit on each individual virtue, and every person is called to practise virtue to an increasingly high degree, tending towards perfection.

*The cardinal virtues.* Above all, we find in St John of God, as it were, a "theorisation" of the four cardinal virtues. In themselves they do not actually stem from the Gospel itself, but from the Aristotelian classification which St Thomas Aquinas took up, before they became commonly used throughout the Church, particularly as a result of Dominican teaching.<sup>18</sup> As he has already been said, we find it in the Third Letter to the Duchess of Sessa:

"Prudence teaches us to act prudently and wisely in everything we must do and think, seeking the advice of those who are older, because they know more than we do. Justice means being just and allotting to each person what is his: give to God everything that is of God and to the world what is of the world. Temperance

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<sup>17</sup> Castro, *op. cit.* Ch. 16 (Translation by Bro. Benedict O'Grady OH).

<sup>18</sup> Even though in various parts of the Bible there are clear and explicit references to these four virtues they are never "grouped together" as such, and were never given a pre-eminent ("cardinal") value over the others. The breakdown here dates back to Plato (*Republic*) as taken up subsequently by Aristotle, before entering in common usage in Christian theology from Saint Ambrose onwards. St Thomas Aquinas worked out the whole of his special morality theories around these virtues and those stemming from them (listing approximately fifty such virtues).

teaches us to use moderation and sobriety in our use of food, drink, clothing and all the other things needed for the care of the human body. Fortitude means that we must be strong and constant in serving God, greeting trial, tribulation and sickness with the same smiling face as if they were prosperity and joy, and offering our thanks to Jesus Christ for them all alike."<sup>19</sup>

The list he gives there only partly follows the traditional breakdown which places fortitude before temperance, because according to St Thomas, temperance is a general condition which should accompany all moral virtues.<sup>20</sup> Even though John lists the virtues parrot-fashion as stated in the catechism mentioned earlier, he also introduces one or two other elements of a certain originality.

For *prudence*, the most significant element is his reference to "seeking the advice of older people". Even though in the *Summa Theologica* the virtue of prudence is linked to the gift of counsel with reference to elders, it is probable that John of God got this from John of Ávila or other spiritual advisers, and it is quite likely that it reflects what he had actually done before embarking upon his life's work.

*Justice*, albeit with the classical form of *unicuique suum*, is related to a certain extent to the "virtue of religion" which is what leads us to give to God what is God's, and is a moral virtue stemming from justice. With regard to the "human" component, John drew no distinction between what we would call today distributive and commutative legal justice. Here again, he offered a re-elaboration of the moral theological principles, and not a mere catechetical transmission of them.

*Temperance*, too, is interpreted in a manner which, while not subjective, is contextualised by John's existential experience, and the issue of corporeity, with which is one of the recurrent issues in his writings and in his life. For temperance not only relates to the bodily sphere, but to the whole area of human life (intellectual, affective, and even spiritual).

Lastly, *fortitude*. This virtue has an active component (addressing difficulties, difficult undertakings, etc) and a passive component (resilience to suffering). John only emphasises the latter, even though he gave years of personal evidence of having practised it to the highest degree. The reason probably lies in the ascetical ideas of his age which placed great stress on the value of the pain-related components. However, once again with great creativity and originality, St John of God listed joy within the virtue of fortitude, to making it

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<sup>19</sup> 3 DS 50-57.

<sup>20</sup> St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, Q.141, a.2.

the reverse side of the coin to suffering, in one single attitude of gratitude to God.

*Charity.* It appears almost superfluous to talk about charity in St John of God because the whole of his life was the highest and heroic expression of charity. Charity is not only a theological virtue in his case, but a moral virtue, too, and in any comprehensive account of John of God's ethics it should be addressed thematically. The most significant reference we have, in my opinion, is once again in the Third Letter to the Duchess of Sessa: "Always have charity, for this is the mother of all the virtues".<sup>21</sup> His words reiterate St Thomas Aquinas's teaching that "since a mother is one who conceives within herself and by another, charity is called the mother of the other virtues, because, by commanding them, it conceives the acts of the other virtues, by the desire of the last end".<sup>22</sup> In reality, John of God had spoken shortly before this about charity in terms of the three theological virtues, but in colder and more catechetical terms than in this more powerful language. These words reveal his great insight, which was by no means a foregone conclusion in the Christian culture of his age, namely, the absolute paramountcy of charity as a fundamental criterion for ethical discernment in Christian life. The parable of the sheep and goats (Mt 25, 31-46) is absolutely compelling here, but this was not the spirit of the age, which was often overwhelmed by devotional and cultic practices, and at all events only focused on formal compliance with the Commandments.

Another major reference to charity is in the same letter "*always show charity because where there is no charity there is no God, even though God is everywhere*". It is obvious that he is repeating, in the negative, the well-known expression of Paolino, Bishop of Aquileia (750-82). Incorporated into the Gregorian hymnal it was sung at the Offertory on Maundy Thursday, and as such John would have known it and have been able to meditate on it.<sup>23</sup> The practice of charity is therefore seen to be clear evidence of God's presence.

Lastly, as already mentioned, charity is addressed in terms of the three theological virtues with a certain catechetical rigidity, which also emerges from the way it is described:

"The second is charity: firstly, charity towards your own souls, purifying them with confession and repentance, and then charity towards your neighbour and towards our brothers and sisters, wishing for them what we wish for ourselves".

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<sup>21</sup> 3 DS 38-40.

<sup>22</sup> *Summa Theologica*, II-II, 23, 8 ad III (Benziger Bros. edition, 1947. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province.

<sup>23</sup> This hymn was composed by Paolino, Bishop of Acquileio (750-802) and incorporated into the Gregorian hymnal. The 1973 Roman Missal, based on ancient manuscripts, change the first verse to *Ubi caritas est vera*.



This is what systematic moral theology once defined as "the order of charity", which has been very simplified here. Aquinas worked out a rigorous hierarchical order for the exercise of charity,<sup>24</sup> even though this is somewhat softened subsequently by the distinction between the subjective and the objective, as a result of which, for example, one must always love God from the objective point of view above our parents, but subjectively we can feel greater affection for our parents.<sup>25</sup> Here, John of God merely affirms the distinction between spiritual love for our own souls and subsequently spiritual love towards our neighbour. There are two points that should be borne in mind in this respect.

- The first is that the hierarchy is both linked by a kind of unbreakable bond which John of God would voice in his fundamental invitation "Do good, brothers, do good *to yourselves*". Doing good to others is therefore related to a subjective and eschatological context too. Today, perhaps due to modern sensitivities, such an invitation might appear somewhat "utilitarian" because it almost sees "exploiting" love for others is a means of self gain (albeit supernatural). Obviously this was not what John meant, when he was clearly reflecting the sentiments of his own age, while at the same time expressing an objectively true theological fact, even though today it is little appreciated today because of the obvious risks it entails. For love of our neighbour must essentially be motivated by the value of otherness/fraternity, and by God's command to practise it. The "meritorious" aspect is merely an evident and essential corollary, but it is not of its essence.
- The second is that in St John of God's life we never find any evidence of that order of priority in practice. Indeed, the whole of his life (except for the fundamental inspiration which linked every act of charity to his personal love of God) is one constant forgetfulness of self for the good of his neighbour. If St John of God had really loved his neighbour "as" he loved himself he would have treated people very badly indeed!!! The fact is that John loved his neighbour far more than he loved himself, neglecting himself and annihilating himself for the material and spiritual good of his neighbour. This is why we said that this quotation conceals the real magnitude of John's charitable dimension and his invitation to practise it.

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<sup>24</sup> Simplifying somewhat, we might say that this order is structured thus: Love of God, love of the spiritual good of our own soul more than the spiritual good of our neighbour; love of the spiritual good of our neighbour more than our own material good; love of our neighbour, and primarily love of our parents; love of our benefactors before love of those benefiting from their help (Cf. A. Royo Marín, *Teologia della carità*, poor line, Rome 1965, 97-103).

<sup>25</sup> *Summa Theologica*, II-II, Q. 26, ad 6-8.

As we have already said, the whole of St John of God's life, following his conversion and his return to Granada, was one wonderful and uninterrupted act of witness of charity. Yet Castro specifically devotes a whole chapter (chapter 16) to describing this virtue. It is not necessary in this paper to summarise it, because the reader can consult the full version in Castro's biography. But we would like to highlight one or two salient features by reference to the more general theme of John of God's ethics.

- The first one, which Castro himself highlighted, was the *boundlessness* of his charity. Every virtue is halfway between two opposite extremes, by excess or by defect, but in terms of quality. In terms of quantity there is no limit to the exercise of a virtue whose practice is always a "beyond", as an ideal to be attained, but can never be fully achieved. Castro emphasises the fact that, "he never refused anything to anyone asking him for something. Many was the time when he had nothing to give but the very clothes that he was wearing. this left him naked and a pitiful sight for all to see. Besides, it was very rough on himself".<sup>26</sup>
- A second element has to do with the *correlation between charity* (towards one's neighbour) and *love of God*. John did not merely have charity, but he practised charity in a wholly supernatural manner, using the unusual expression "I give myself to God" (*dome a Dios*) when begging for alms. Giving to the poor was, for him, giving himself totally to God.
- Another aspect that Castro stresses was the *extent* of his charity. Even though we are accustomed nowadays to consider him (also through the latest developments in his Order) to be the saint of charity towards the sick, in this particular chapter Castro talks about the poor, the sick (differentiating between different types of sick people, who were not always taken in by other types of institutions), and abandoned children, students, ("the ashamed poor" (*vergonzantes*) that is to say, the fallen nobility whom he visited in their own homes, pilgrims and others (such as the prostitutes that Castro spoke about in another part of his book).<sup>27</sup> And in chapter XII, he also spoke about widows, orphans, parties to lawsuits, errant soldiers, etc.
- Lastly, there is one element that may have not been emphasised so far but which has very modern features: the social dimension of his charitable work. At the end of the chapter Castro says:

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<sup>26</sup> Castro, *op. cit.* Chapter 14 (Translation by Bro. Benedict O'Grady OH).

<sup>27</sup> This is the translation of the concept of *pauper verecundus*, the term used in the Middle Ages for wealthy people who had lost their wealth and were loath to be seen publicly subsequently, and lived in poverty.

“All this is going on this day at the hospital. He took care to see that those given shelter did not offend our Lord, so he separated the men from the women, putting the women in a place of their own. In that way he kept the place respectable and free from undesirables.”

- *Hospitality*. In addition to the three theological virtues (Faith, Hope and Charity) and the four cardinal virtues (Prudence, Justice, Fortitude and Temperance) there is a whole list of *moral virtues* which derive from the previous ones or are correlated to them in various ways. St Thomas lists about 50 merely by way of example, and not exhaustively. Among all of them I would like to select a few which have particular significance to us for various reasons. The first is obviously hospitality, which is both a virtue practised to a supremely heroic degree by St John of God, and the founding Charism, and lastly the object of the fourth vow by the Brothers of the Hospitaller Order.

As already indicated, the initial, founding, moment was certainly the period he spent in the Granada hospital, and his well-known words “May Jesus Christ eventually give me the grace to run a hospice where the abandoned poor and those suffering from mental disorders might have refuge and that I may be able to serve them as I wish.” (*Castro*, Chapter IX).

The virtue of hospitality is evidenced directly and indirectly in many instances in Holy Scripture. While I refer the reader to more specific accounts for a more thorough analysis,<sup>28</sup> I would merely like to call a number of essential references from the New Testament. The first and perhaps the most significant for the purposes of John of God's own experience, is the parable of the Good Samaritan, which is present today in the Lectionary for the Feast of St John of God. The moment in which the Samaritan takes the wounded man to the inn is being transition from *individual* hospitality (exercised by the Samaritan by looking after him directly) to *institutional* hospitality, which would be the one specifically practised by John God. Furthermore, the Greek word which is generically translated as “inn” is *pan-dokéion*, which has the literal meaning of “taking in everyone”. You can almost hear John's own words here: “Since this house is for everybody (*así como esta casa es general*), without making any distinctions we take in people suffering from every disease, and people of every type”.<sup>29</sup>

In the New Testament there are also numerous references to the virtue of hospitality:

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<sup>28</sup> S. Leone, *Le radici teologiche dell'hospitalitas*, Vita Monastica LX, n. 233, 1-2 (2006).

<sup>29</sup> 2 GL, 5.

- In his letter to the Romans Paul describes it as one of the fruits of charity, "Contribute to the needs of the saints, practise hospitality" (*hospitalitatem sectantes* Rom 12, 13);
- In his first Letter, Peter stressed reciprocity "Practise hospitality ungrudgingly to one another" (1 Pt 4, 9);
- In the pastoral letters it emerges as a specific duty of the Bishop "Now a bishop must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, sensible, dignified, hospitable, an apt teacher, " (1 Tim 3, 2; cf. also Tit 1, 8);
- In the letter to the Hebrews, lastly, Paul emphasises its linkage with Charity, from which other works of mercy stem, relating it in the wake of Mt 25, 31-45 to other works of mercy: " Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them; and those who are ill-treated, since you also are in the body. " (Heb 13, 1-3).

On the level of systematic thought there are three motives which make hospitality "virtuous":

- The first is *ethical-anthropological*. The commandment of love, particularly for those who are in a precarious existential state, is in identifying the "poor" with Christ as the principal *raison d'être*. Taking in and welcoming the other, is welcoming in Christ Himself who is concealed in the person of the guest. This is made explicit in the parable of the sheep and goats (Mt 25, 31-45) and was subsequently reinterpreted in the life of John of God in the well-known episode, recounted by Celi of the poor man who was transfigured into Christ as John washed his feet.<sup>30</sup>
- The second characteristic is *eschatological*. Referring once again to the same parable, hospitality becomes one of the parameters for the Day of Judgement. When John speaks in his Third Letter to the Duchess of Sessa about "three things to bear in mind".<sup>31</sup> One of these is Heaven: "consider the glory and blessedness that Jesus Christ has reserve to for those who serve Him, whom no eye can see, no ear hear, and whom no heart has ever been able to imagine".<sup>32</sup> We know very well that for John, "serving God" means above all serving him directly or indirectly in the poor.

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<sup>30</sup> This episode is recounted in chapter 9 of Celi's biography and even though it is a *topos* found in the lives of many other saints, it became one of the most representative episodes in the iconography of John of God.

<sup>31</sup> In practice the things that the catechesis would subsequently call the "novissima" or the "Four Last Things" from which, in St John of God's version, "judgement" is omitted, and is included in the other three to some extent.

<sup>32</sup> 2 DS 85-87.

- The third reason, lastly, is Christological. The Old Testament's pressing invitations to take in strangers together with others living in conditions of marginalisation find in the person of Jesus Himself and in His witness their finest example. And the testimony given by John of God is consistent with this. His embodiment of Christ, his being an *alter Christus* in his relations with the sick emerges quite evidently from some of the statements made by the witnesses in his Process of Beatification.
- *Patience and humility.* Among John's many other virtues I would merely like to recall two of them, because they form the specific subject of a Chapter in Castro's biography, which indicates that they must have been particularly well-developed in John, and caught the attention of those around him. In themselves these two virtues are each related to different cardinal virtues (patience to fortitude, and humility to temperance).<sup>33</sup>

Three episodes have been described. In the first one, John literally offered the other cheek to a man who was angry with him because he had bumped into him, and then even asked him to slap him again, harshly accusing himself of being in the wrong. In the second case, a young boy who thought John was still out of his mind threw him into a tub of water, from which he emerged smiling and thanking him. In the third episode, lastly, one of the prostitutes he had unable to find a husband for continued to pester him for money, even when she saw that he was wrapped in a blanket because he had given away everything he possessed. She insulted him violently because this time he was unable to meet her demands, and John gathered together a few coins and asked her to go to the square to continue to insult him in front of everybody.

Apart from these individual episodes (and certainly there would have been other similar ones) any ethical reflection we might engage in has to do with his patience, but above all his humility. On the borderline between ethics and spirituality, in the history of theology the virtue of humility has been examined in terms of various "degrees", from 12 by St Benedict to only 3 by St Ignatius. According to the various authors, at the highest level there must always be some heroic practice of humility leading the person "to believe and confess that they are unworthy and useless for any purpose whatsoever" (the 7<sup>th</sup> degree of St Benedict), "to rejoice at being treated as a coward" (the 7<sup>th</sup> degree of St Anselm), "to submit to an inferior" (3<sup>rd</sup> degree of St Bernard), "to wish to be considered ignorant and stupid for Christ

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<sup>33</sup> More particularly, according to the classical Thomistic breakdown, patience is one of the "integral parts" of fortitude (together with perseverance, magnanimity and magnificence), while humility is one of the "potential parts" of temperance (together with continence, mildness, clemency and moderation).

rather than wise and prudent" (3<sup>rd</sup> degree for St Ignatius Loyola), "to desire to be treated as a coward, gratefully excepting scorn, humiliations and ill-treatment" (3<sup>rd</sup> degree of the Ven. Olier). As we can see, the episodes recounted by Castro (and others scattered around his biography and in other sources) reveal that John practised the virtues at all times to the maximum degree.

- *Obedience*. This was also a virtue to which our Saint attached particular importance and one of the virtues in respect of which the influence of the teachings of St John of Avila are probably most evident. For it is to this virtue that he devoted much of his first letter to St John of God. In it he invited the Saint to consult other people's opinions at all times, which he always steered subsequently in the implementation of his works. The strong emphasis placed on disobedience as the "work of the devil" has to be seen, according to the theology of his day, in relation to the construction placed on original sin essentially as the "sin of pride". The sacrifice of Christ "who was *obedient* unto death" (*Phil 2,8*) therefore appeared to be a redeeming action healing this sin precisely by virtue of His obedience to the Father. John of God practised this virtue in a particular way in his own personal sphere as far as spiritual direction was concerned.<sup>34</sup> yet in the purely spiritual sphere, obedience overlapped into the specifically moral a wide-ranging sphere. It is no coincidence that he said to Luis Bautista: "if you come here you must be very obedient".<sup>35</sup> But this virtue was not related exclusively to religious authority but to all authority in general, considering obedience to be, to a certain extent of divine origin.<sup>36</sup>

3.2.2. *Sexual and family morality*. Within the sphere of sexual morality two preliminary clarifications are needed. The first has to do with the social and cultural context in which John of God lived in 16th century Spain. All sexual issues were strictly taboo not only in purely religious terms but also social. It was not only difficult but unthinkable to explicitly address problems of sexuality. A certain number of particular conditions, such as homosexuality, were also likely to fall within the jurisdiction of the Inquisition. In addition to this general situation there was also John God's particular delicacy and sensitivity regarding his decision to opt for a celibate life which, while not being a Religious profession in the full sense of the term, was certainly a state of life characterised by a renunciation of the exercise of conjugal sexuality. With these preliminary clarifications, and in order to identify the fundamental aspects of sexual problem in St John of God's ethics, we can identify three

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34 Cf. II GL 54-55

35 LB 46

36 Cf. what John of God said to the King of Spain (see note 72).

fundamental avenues: condemning/redeeming prostitution, practising chastity, and stressing the value of conjugal life and fidelity.

*Prostitution.* John's concern about the world of prostitution is an important aspect of his ministry. For this was dimension of charity fraught with ethical and social implications. In some respects only recently has the role of "street units" been rediscovered which, *mutatis mutandis*, perform work which is not so very different from what St John of God did in his day. Castro devotes a whole chapter to it, but we find traces in other biographies and in his own writings. It is interesting to identify not only the ethical motivation that drove him, which is itself quite evident, but also the "pastoral method" he used. "Upon entering a house, he headed straight for the most abandoned soul, because he thought that she would have the least chance of getting out of the place". Appearances alone could certainly have been deceptive, but behind this statement, there was probably a particularly incisive sensitivity that helped him to see clearly. Secondly, he did not attack them by lecturing them or condemning their way of life but accused himself, almost "empathising" with the common condition of sinfulness. Lastly, he related the women's sin to the work of redemption. With great candour, Castro says that John was not a messianic saviour because many of the women were so "hardened by vice" that they ignored whatever he said to them. But others (and perhaps here the author provides an excessively rose-tinted account) were converted. But this was hampered by the pimps who did not wish to release them to go off with John, no differently from what happens today. John undertook to pay them for loss of earnings. The next phase was twofold. First of all he took any of the women who had contracted diseases in the course of their work to his hospital. Castro has left a very vivid description of their dreadful conditions:

"Some of them had maggots crawling out of their putrid heads. others had parts of their bodies cauterised by fire and others were left hideously mutilated after undergoing painful amputations."<sup>37</sup>

Subsequently he set about their "social reintegration" trying to find out "what each woman was minded to do" and then, in respect of the various vocational identities, he saw to it that they had a dowry and found them husbands, or steered them to a convent.<sup>38</sup>

John was also very keen on prevention. For yesterday, like today, prostitution was common in the poorest sections of society, and it was a grim, but easy way to make ends meet. By providing financial support to many of the girls,

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<sup>37</sup> Castro *op. cit.* XIII (Translation by Bro. Benedict O'Grady OH).

<sup>38</sup> This was a convent of *recogidas*, that is to say "withdrawn women". It was an institution similar to a home in which former prostitutes were able to find a permanent haven living like a Religious Congregation, similar to a third Order.

John of God not only saw his work as an immediate act of charity but also as a long-term preventive action. When he left money with the Duchess of Sessa to help the poor girls, from his sick bed he said:

"They consist of four ducats: three for those poor girls, so that they may buy two blankets and two skirts, because a soul is worth more than all the treasures of the world and those girls should be saved from sinning for such a small thing".<sup>39</sup>

- *Chastity*. We could have discussed this in the section on virtues, but we are doing it here, not only for logical consistency with the rest of the paragraph, but also because there are not many ethical and descriptive elements to raise. From what has already been said and from the personal life choices John made, there is a great deal of sensitivity about this point, at least as far as the personal sphere was concerned.<sup>40</sup> But in relation to others, there are at least two references worthy of note, also because of a certain, perhaps involuntarily, touch of humour that emerges. The first is mentioned by Castro in the biography. He says that a very beautiful woman came to Granada to deal with some law suit, probably to do with her financial situation which was rather precarious. Having told John about her problem, as he happened providentially to be passing by his lawyer's house where the lady was staying, he found her temporary accommodation and told her to "stay indoors and not go out, in order not to place her honour in jeopardy." But in reality it was not necessary to go out in order to place one's honour in jeopardy. When he went to that house the second time he found her very elegantly dressed. Sensing something was wrong, he chided her and earnestly urged her "to do what she had to do". But in reality the woman had a boy hidden under her bed who, on hearing John's words, came out in tears, obviously converted, and determined to change his way of life.<sup>41</sup>

We find the second reference in the letter to Luis Bautista, a young man whom John knew and who wanted to follow him, but was somewhat reluctant to do so. What we can conclude from the account is that Luis Bautista was somewhat wayward, and John of God was therefore very clear about the hard word it would entail, if he did decide to follow him (carrying his own skin on his shoulders, as St Bartholomew had to) and knowing the youth quite well, he told him that his sex life had to be beyond reproach: "And seeing that very often you have a particular

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<sup>39</sup> 1 DS 105-108.

<sup>40</sup> It is most likely that there was a powerful influence of Master Avila here, inviting him "not to have too much to do with women because they are the traps prepared by the devil to cause those who serve God to fall. (St John of Avila, 1st Letter to St John of God). St John of God would subsequently repeat this warning using almost identical words to Luis Bautista: "you must guard yourself against women as if they were the devil " (LB 54).

<sup>41</sup> Castro, *op. cit.* XIX.



weakness for women, I am not sure whether to let you come here"<sup>42</sup> and "But remember that if you do come, you must be serious about it and must guard yourself against women as if they were the devil."<sup>43</sup> This latter statement was by no mean an indication of John's misogyny, but demonstrates his clear-sightedness, because he knew perfectly well who he was addressing and what he had in mind.

There are a few explicit references to sexual transgressions. Once, when he was in hospital after being punched by a man he had asked for alms, he said to the patient in the next bed, "You have been married twice, and both women are still alive; and you have also committed the sin of sodomy".<sup>44</sup> Another episode in his biography, this time to do with adultery, speaks of his attempts to persuade a woman to confess that she had lived for six years with a man who was not her husband.<sup>45</sup>

- *Marriage and the family.* The last element of sexual ethics has to do with the question of his attitude to the family as an institution. We can make numerous considerations in this regard. Firstly, there is is understanding not only of the religious nature of the family, but also its social character, seeing it as an essential cell of society, and the "common" sphere of life for the laity (there was no vocation to remain 'single' in the culture of his age). Secondly, the common ethical and religious idea of his age was that conjugal sexuality was essentially intended for its "primary end", namely, procreation, and secondarily, for *mutuum adiutorium et remedium concupiscentiae*. Lastly we should, I believe, mention John's "great nostalgia" for a family. Castro provides a very moving description of his return to Montemor-o-Novo, when he learned from his uncle that his mother had died, as a result of John's disappearance as a child, and his deep sense of guilt as a result. In this future choices, in his desire to "marry off" prostitutes, his appreciation of the family life of the Duchess of Sessa, and his visits to so many families in Granada, enables us to sense his feeling of regret at never having had a family of his own.

I would like to cite two quotations which I believe clearly highlight this issue:

"With regard to the good knight who I believe is your eldest son, things will turn out as God wills; may Our Lord Jesus Christ be with him in all matters and in his deeds and actions. It seems to me that, if God so wills, it would be better to marry him as soon as possible if he himself says that this is what he wants. When I say 'as soon as possible', I do not mean that you should kill yourself over this, for your

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<sup>42</sup> LB, 13-15.

<sup>43</sup> LB, 52-54.

<sup>44</sup> Castro *op. cit.* XVIII (Translation by Bro. Benedict O'Grady OH).

<sup>45</sup> Castro *op.cit.* XV.

main concern should be to pray to God to give him a good wife, since I have the feeling that he is still very young; Our Lord Jesus Christ willing, I hope that he is inwardly mature for his years. Every person must embrace the state for which God intends him. And parents should therefore not be so anxious and exercised over it but should rather pray to God to grant the state of grace to each of their sons and daughters. When God so wishes, one will marry and the other will sing Masses, and I really know nothing about all this, for God knows everything. May it please Our Lord Jesus Christ to settle your children as you wish in the way in which he is best served. Our Lord knows better than you what he must do with your sons and daughters, and you must accept everything Our Lord Jesus Christ does and see it as for the best."<sup>46</sup>

A number of important points are raised here. The first is his view of marriage as *remedium concupiscentiae*, the desire to see him married 'as soon as possible', the hope that he is inwardly mature, etc. The second is the evidence of his great sensitivity and pastoral psychology, where he urges the parents not to interfere too much, at least not directly, in their son's choice, but rather to pray to God that their son would make a fully responsible choice. Lastly, and what I consider to have been very advanced for his age, the suggestion that was just beginning to emerge of the equivalence of the choice to marry and the choice to seek priestly ordination, which greatly reflects St Paul placing the two vocations on the same plane, since "each one has his gift from God" (1 Cor 7, 7). The earlier religious climate, but the main religious idea in John's age, was that the Religious Life (particularly the monastic life) was superior beyond doubt. The Laity (until the 1983 Code of Canon Law) were defined in negative terms as "non-clerics"! But John saw things in a profoundly different way and he was decidedly ahead of his times: only God knows all things, and only when He wills it will "one man will get married and another man sing Mass". The emphasis on vocation is properly placed in God, and God's will, not man's. We can therefore understand how it is that, in ethical terms, our commitment must be to respond not so much a personal commitment but to God's call, which also applies to the call to conjugal and married life.

The second quotation, which is very different in character, almost idyllic and it somewhat affected is this:

"O good Duchess! You live like the chaste turtle-dove, alone and withdrawn in your villa, far from contact with the court, waiting for the good Duke, your generous and humble husband. You spend your time in prayer and alms-giving, always practising charity so that your generous and humble husband, the good Duke of Sessa, may share in this, and so that Christ may protect his body from danger and his soul from sin. May God be pleased to bring him back to you soon and give you children of

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<sup>46</sup> 1 GL, 42-59.

blessing, so that you may always serve and love the Lord and offer him the fruit he gives you so that he may make use of it."<sup>47</sup>

This is certainly a highly idealised picture of family life, but it does paint the picture of a woman/wife living a virtuous life far away from all temptations, looking after her husband, while he, far away at war, is exposed not only to physical threats but also the temptations of the flesh. And on his return, as we said earlier regarding the ethos of his age, the deep sense of his return to home life is intended for procreation. Moreover, with this approach, women express their subordinate and passive status by offering their husband the fruit which "he" has given them, "so that he may make use of it". There is no doubt that this is a pretty reductive view, stemming from the culture of the age which was destined to linger on for centuries to come.

One final point has to do with the broader spiritual sense of the family, which also encompassed guardianship and adoption, as John reminds us<sup>48</sup> and as was to be the practice in virtually all the hospitals founded by his followers, St John of God took in many abandoned babies, and did everything possible to find an appropriate family willing to bring them up. ("as soon as I feel better I will come and see you at once and bring you the baby girls you requested".<sup>49</sup> In an age when red tape was less tangled than it is today, and there were fewer scandals about paedophilia, this was standard practice. And this is precisely because of what we know of John's personal experience of growing up without a family, John must have been particularly sensitive to this issue.

3.2.3. *The morality of physical life.* Obviously when we talk about "the morality of physical life" we are not referring to what we mean today by "Bioethics", but rather to what the post-Tridentine *Summae confessorium* and subsequent *Institutiones theologiae moralis* would summarise in the treaty on the *quinto praecepto*.

- *The question of corporeity.* I believe that we should systematically examine the whole issue of corporeity. An existential experience wholly devoted to meeting the bodily needs, even before spiritual needs, of our neighbour must necessarily include a comprehensive understanding of this important issue.

The first point that one immediately sees is John's extraordinary concern about to people's physical lives and the scant attention he paid to his own. The Christological reference here is evident and immediate. John truly did not "give a thought for his own life" (cf. Mt 6, 25) but he was extremely

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<sup>47</sup> 1 DS 11.

<sup>48</sup> "... for the maintenance of the children abandoned here", GL, 7.

<sup>49</sup> 3 DS 60-67

attentive to the lives of others, whose needs he sought to alleviate and pre-empt in every way possible.

This paradoxical but Gospel-based antinomy was taken up very well by Castro who reported the following:

"He ate little, and only one food. And when he was away from home and those with whom he was staying invited him to dine, he always chose the least preferred portions. Usually he ate baked onions or some other common sort of food. On prescribed fast days he skipped breakfast and ate less later. On Fridays all he took was bread and water. Throughout the year on that day he disciplined himself with a knotted whip, even to the point of drawing blood. he did this even when he was overcome with tiredness and sleep. His bed was a coarse mat upon the floor, his pillow a stone and his covering a tattered old blanket. Sometimes he slept in a trolley left by a cripple in a small alcove beneath the staircase. When ever he went about the city or on a journey he never covered his head nor wore shoes. He used an open razor to keep his hair and beard closely cropped. He wore neither shirt nor any other garment beneath the coarse smock tied up on the outside of his rough woollen breeches. He never rode a beast on his journeys nor at any other place, even when he was footsore and weary. From the day that he began serving Our Lord until he called him to himself, he never covered his head but went about both bareheaded and barefooted, even in rain and snow storms. Added to all that, he put up with the little cares of all those about him. he cheered them up and made them happy."<sup>50</sup>

The importance that John attached to the body not only related to sick bodies but also to healthy ones. He told the Duchess of Sessa "there are three things you must devote time to everyday: work, prayer and looking after your body".<sup>51</sup> This is a very significant passage which should not be underestimated. The first two elements are the traditional, Benedictine-inspired, view of *ora et labora*, as the total use of one's time. St John of God, perhaps to re-modulate in lay terms this monastic principle, he added "care of the body" as a typical way of using one's time. And he qualified it in the following way:

"Because, just as a muleteer feeds and looks after his beast so that he can make use of it, so we should give our bodies what they need so that we have the strength to serve Jesus Christ."<sup>52</sup>

This might appear to be a reductive view, perhaps reflecting the Franciscan idea of the body as "brother ass", but in reality it is a view that carefully respects the just demands of the body, even if it oriented in one direction, towards serving God. However, John also showed that he was the son of his age, and of the spirituality which penalised the body. For he goes on to write:

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<sup>50</sup> Castro *op. cit.* XVII (Translation by Bro. Benedict O'Grady OH).

<sup>51</sup> 3 DS, 67-68.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

"There is also another enemy – the greatest – like a thieving servant living in our own home, trying to bring us to perdition with pretty words and ways. This is the flesh – our own body – which wants only to eat well, drink well, dress well, sleep, work little, give itself up to the pleasures of the flesh, and bask in the admiration of others."<sup>53</sup>

Penitential rigour, not only in his way of life (food, dress, bed, etc) but also his rigid penitential exercises (lashing his body every Friday and often on other days) are evident proof of this.

- *Sickness and health.* Speaking of sickness and health practically means telling John of God's whole life story and life work. But to keep strictly to the subject of this paper, I will merely try to highlight the main ethical aspects.

First of all in a cultural environment that placed great emphasis on the value of pain, and the linkage between "suffering" as such, and original sin, and between sufferings and individual sins, John did not "*moralise*" the state of sickness. There was no recrimination, no condemnation of sin (in relation to sickness), no invitation to resign oneself to it, no catechesis of the sick to highlight the expiatory character of their sufferings, but simply acting *practically to alleviate* all suffering in every possible way, even suffering as a result of what today we might call "risky behaviour" (sexually-transmitted diseases, which were dealt with in hospitals for "incurables").

And in addition to everything he was actually able to do himself (their personal hygiene, offering a hot meal, giving shelter from bad weather etc) John primarily entered into a relationship of love and *com-compassion* with his sick guests, suffering deeply as a result of their sufferings:

" I have received the letter you sent me from Jaén it gave me a great deal of joy and much satisfaction, although I was sorry to hear that you have had toothache, because any ill that befalls you makes me suffer too, just as any good thing makes me joyful."<sup>54</sup>

"I often do not leave the house because of my many debts, and I am also very unhappy when I see so many poor people (who are my brothers and neighbours) suffering and in great need in both body and soul, and I cannot help them."<sup>55</sup>

"While I was walking through the city of Córdoba the other day I came across a household in very dire need. There were two girls whose parents had both been sick and bedridden for ten years. They were so poor and in such distress that it broke my heart... I commended these poor people to some people who then forgot - or would

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<sup>53</sup> 2 DS, 81-85.

<sup>54</sup> LB, 5-7.

<sup>55</sup> 2 GL, 33-36.

not or could not do more. They have written me a letter and what they tell me in it is heart-breaking."<sup>56</sup>

Caring for the sick was, in John of God's eyes, a *moral duty*. Others attracted him because of their otherness, particularly if they were in need. And the very fact that he involved just about everyone in his work – his direct co-workers, benefactors and even passers-by – reveals his understanding of care for the poor as a universal and unavoidable duty. Even though he showed great respect for the dignity of people and freedom of conscience, he never forced anyone to help him, always looking after the sick himself, picking them up and carrying them on his shoulders, without asking anyone to assist him, etc.

If we wish to reflect on this in purely ethical-normative terms we might say that his care for the needy the result of the way he combined "nature and grace". He was deeply sensitive by nature to the sufferings of others, and the state of need of others. Evidence of this comes from those few episodes which Castro provides in his biography prior to John's conversion:

"As a shepherd he was able to lead so many poor wretched people by procuring both spiritual and temporal nourishment for them and curing their bodily ills by his labours. When he sadly remembered how well fed, protected and healthy the horses in the Count of Oropesa's stables were, whilst the poor were so badly off, ragged and hungry, he said to himself: 'John, would it not be better if you learned how to feed and care for the poor people of Jesus Christ rather than farm animals?' Then sighing he added, 'Please God that some day I may be able to do that.'"<sup>57</sup>

With regard to the second of these two, John of God radically provided care and attention in this comprehensive manner as a result of the discovery of his vocation: *gratia perficit naturam*. This consideration is important if we are to understand how the whole of his life's work, following the change resulting from his conversion, exploited the value of personal charisms, and was not limited merely to granting new ones. We can draw on this to reach a number of general conclusions regarding our moral duty to help the needy, which also takes account of personal aptitudes and predispositions. In St John of God's life, caring for the poor and the needy involved a large number of people, respecting their individual charisms: there were those who helped him directly, those who provided financial support, those who hosted the women he had redeemed from prostitution or foundlings etc. In moral theological terms we might say that the constituent value of helping others in a state of need would find various normative ways of doing so, as a result of personal conscience-based decisions.

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<sup>56</sup> 1 DS, 90-100.

<sup>57</sup> Castro op.cit. IV (Translation by Bro. Benedict O'Grady OH).

- *Birth and death.* We have already seen his concern for newborn life, evidenced from the way it took in abandoned newborn babies, and found them a suitable family to bring them up. Abortion was certainly a widespread scourge even then, despite the fact that it was strongly condemned. We have evidence of this in an episode in Celi's biography which recounts the story of a woman who had taken a potion to force a miscarriage. He tried to persuade her to confess her sin, and succeeded only after numerous attempts, earning the admiration of the Franciscan confessor, Fr Juan Collazo, who was amazed at the way John was able to read people's hearts."<sup>58</sup> We know very well that this biography is not wholly reliable, since it contains wonder-working and other legendary episodes, but this particular episode which names people who really existed and were well-known to John of God, is credible if not for the fact that he was able to "read people's hearts", at least in respect of the actual event itself.

Furthermore, giving birth to a child outside wedlock and the resultant attempts at abortion were not infrequent events, even in those days, as we know (indirectly, because the woman was innocent) from this strange episode.

"A married man had been away from home for many months. When he returned the wife did not realise it, and he found her with a baby in her arms. Having surprised her in this way with a baby, and since the woman was unable to conceal the fact, he wanted to kill her for her infidelity. Upon being found out, the woman told her husband not to be angry and not to be unhappy because the baby he had seen her holding was a poor child who had been brought to her house by St John of God who had paid her to look after it and feed it (because the child was already weaned). The husband locked her indoors, and took away the key so that she could speak with no-one, and went out to find St John of God. Seeing him coming, John went out to greet him and said, 'Brother, I know that you are angry with your wife because of the baby that she is bringing up, but it is a poor little orphan child, and I give your wife a small sum every month to feed it; but if you do not want to keep him at home, I will take him back.' Seeing this miracle, the man threw himself at the feet of blessed Father John of God, leading for forgiveness for the harm he had done, and said that he wished to keep the baby as his own so that his wife could bring the child up without seeking any recompense." (Testimony given by Luís Ordóñez de Lara).

As far as death was concerned, there were far fewer ethical problems than the ones that exist today regarding the dying process (euthanasia, futile invasive treatment, proportionality of treatment, etc). The relatively short human lifespan, the presence of incurable diseases, epidemics, wars, famines and so on made death far more common and far more predictable than it is are

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<sup>58</sup> G. Magliozzi, *San Giovanni di Dio narrato del Celi*, Centro Studi S. Giovanni di Dio, Roma, 1993, 61 (summary of Ch. XV of Celi's biography).

today, and in a sense death was always lurking around the corner. The moral perspective had to do with the duties towards the dead person and their family members, particularly if death had left a widow or widower in poverty. John of God was particularly sensitive to all these issues. One well-known episode which happened where what we still call today the "*casa del muerto*" in Calle Horno de Marina, recalls the duty to bury the dead. One day, John found a naked corpse in the street, and after requesting a rich gentleman living nearby to help him, and being refused, he loaded the body onto his shoulders and literally laid it on the rich man's doorstep and said, "Brother, both you and I have the duty to bury him...".<sup>59</sup>

- *War*. Once again we have, I believe, to draw a distinction between the individual and the social aspect of war. Individually, there is no doubt that John not only rejected any form of physical violence, but often gave proof of mildness to a heroic degree, enduring punishing, slaps, beatings and sometimes literally "turning the other cheek".

The social aspect is rather different. Obviously here again he did not accept physical violence in interpersonal terms, but at the same time there was no serious criticism of war. Let us not forget that before his conversion he had been a soldier, and for a strange failure to obey orders he was also condemned to executed. Even Castro says that "war work" was very conducive to the spiritual life.<sup>60</sup> This was obviously intended in a metaphorical sense, meaning that we should never lay down our arms. Let us not forget that in those days many vocations to the Religious Life came from the military world, not to mention the Society of Jesus where Saint Ignatius was to transfer (both in practice and terminology) the customs and traditions of military life.

Even though war is generically rejected as an instrument of offence, the theory of "just war" was fully justified, and that was to remain practically unchanged (except with certain restrictions gradually imposed on the application of the principle) right up until Vatican II.

Every saint, as we have already tried to show, is also the product of their age, animated they may be by a prophetic spirit. It would probably be anachronistic to expect it to be otherwise. But even in later centuries, the Brothers of the Hospital Order would often be working beside soldiers on the battlefields, nursing the war wounded. The Hospitaller Charism was wholly directed towards treating the sick and injured even though,

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<sup>59</sup> Testimony by Juan Bautista Bravo, No. 36 (in J.L. Martínez, *op. cit.* 177)

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Castro *op. cit.* IV.



precisely because of the war, many others would subsequently suffer martyrdom, the most outstanding being our Spanish martyrs in 1936.

3.2.6. *Social morality.* We approach this aspect of John of God's ethics in terms of modern ethical-social categories which do not always perfectly fit in with the mentality of 16th century Spain. But this is only a breakdown we are using for the purposes of what we are trying to show here.

- *Social and health care.* To understand the importance in socio-ethical terms of the work of St John of God we have to view it in the context of his own age, and above all in terms of the civil and ecclesiastical "policies" regarding war.<sup>61</sup> At the beginning of the 16th century various states were beginning to provide forms of "public" care for the sick, the poor and beggars, even though they always fell seriously short of needs, or were inadequate in terms of what they intended to do, partly because the facilities (the Charity Hospital for women, Corpus Christi hospital for the wounded, Saint Lazarus hospital for lepers, and the Resurrection Hospital for beggars) would not accept more patients than they could provide beds for. The great Granada Royal Hospital was certainly no exception. This hospital had been instituted at the orders of the Catholic Monarchs, but it never managed to wholly fulfil their intentions.<sup>62</sup> At all events, "hospital admissions" were always subject to somewhat complex bureaucratic practices and entailed acquiring various opinions and authorisations from the health authorities.<sup>63</sup>

This work was backed up by charitable work provided by the Church (in particular the Archbishop's Saint Anne's Hospital in Granada) through alms given mainly by the parishes, and also thanks to provisional facilities for admitting people to monasteries and Religious houses in general. But the financial plight of the population impoverished by war, epidemics, and by the large numbers of unemployed widows, and abandoned babies etc meant that the cities were full of masses of poor people unable to gain admission to any of these facilities, and with no means of survival, who were forced into the streets, creating law and order problems. In many European countries begging was outlawed, with severe penalties being imposed on beggars, while in others the authorities only agreed to help the poor belonging to their own towns and cities, and others prohibited innkeepers from taking in homeless people. Seen against the background of this cultural

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<sup>61</sup> P. Christophe, *I poveri e la povertà nella storia della Chiesa*, Messaggero, Padova, 1995.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. G. Magliozzi, *Lo firmo con queste mie tre lettere*, Biblioteca Ospedaliera, Roma, 1996, 27-46.

<sup>63</sup> Testimony of Ambrosio Maldonado in the case against the Jeronymites (J. Sánchez-Martínez, *op. cit.*, 374-387).

climate we can clearly see how it was that St John of God's work appeared so socially innovative, quite apart from its purely charitable character:

- By its evident universal character, taking in all kinds of sick people (in contrast to the rules governing other facilities which restricted admissions to the local people or excluded incurables or mentally ill people):

"From the time the hospital was founded all the poor people who turned up their were taken in with great love and generosity without worrying whether they were local people or outsiders, whether their sicknesses was treatable or whether they were incurable, or whether they were out of their minds or mentally disturbed, or were babies or orphans."<sup>64</sup>

- By the fact that no ceiling was imposed on the numbers of people who could be admitted:

"Usually here at Granada eighteen or twenty brothers are caring for the poor people in the wards of the hospital... Sometimes it is necessary to put up three or four hundred beds... It was always like that from the moment that blessed John left us his hospital: to take care of everybody without turning anyone away, make-shift stretchers would be set up when the beds ran out. That is how they cared for them. Once they had been given the sacraments nobody died on the floor."<sup>65</sup>

- By the fact that he went out to look for the poor and the sick in the streets, without waiting for them to come looking for him;

"He was able to rent a house near the fish market close to the Plaza Bibarrambla. Here he bought all the abandoned sick and cripples he found."<sup>66</sup>

From these and other testimonies and considerations one can see that he did not improvise his care work, but performed it knowing very well what were the limitations of the social and welfare services available at the time in his city and elsewhere in Spain.

- *Rich and poor.* The cultural climate of his day was nevertheless already changing, and the poverty that had been so highly lauded by the Church and taken as a key virtue by, for example, the Franciscans, began to be considered (by St John of God, as well) to be something that had to be combated. Types of planning were being theorised to overcome poverty. One decisive influence here was the

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<sup>64</sup> Testimony by Juan de Ávila (in J. Sánchez-Martínez, *op. cit.* 374-387).

<sup>65</sup> Castro *op. cit.* XXIII (Translation by Bro. Benedict O'Grady OH)

<sup>66</sup> Castro, *op. cit.* XII (Translation by Bro. Benedict O'Grady OH).

thinking of a writer of Spanish origin, Ludovic Vives, who, in a book published in Bruges in 1526, attacked false beggars and urged the courts to provide them with assistance rationally using the profits made by existing charitable foundations, guaranteeing them jobs and taking in the disabled.<sup>67</sup> Some of these "solutions" were certainly implemented by John of God through his benefactors, even though he always operated in terms of a Gospel perspective rather than any social policy. This is shown, for example, from his reply to those who charged him with giving alms to people who were probably only faking poverty (which was very frequent in those days, as Vives reported): "if I am tricked that is their business. All I know is that I am giving it to them for the love of God."<sup>68</sup>

With regard specifically to the use of money, in John's day there was a precedent that everywhere knew, that is to say, the Franciscan idea that money was the "manure of the devil", making "my Lady Poverty" the fundamental kingpin of their charismatic identity. But the practice of poverty had also become an open denunciation of wealth, even the show of wealth, not least by the Church itself. This opposition to wealth was not expressed violently or in forms that deviated from orthodoxy like the many 'pauperist' movements which often became heretical sects, but it was a mild, peaceful and silent choice of life that contained within it this critical and revolutionary potential.

In St John of God the situation was very different, even if it was by no means inferior, and indeed in many respects it was more drastic, than in St Francis, considering his extremely active and wearying way of life.

"He ate little, and only one food. And when he was away from home and those with whom he was staying invited him to dine, he always chose the least preferred portions. Usually he ate baked onions or some other common sort of food. On prescribed fast days he skipped breakfast and ate less later. On Fridays all he took was bread and water... His bed was a coarse mat upon the floor, his pillow a stone and his covering a tattered old blanket. Sometimes he slept in a trolley left by a cripple in a small alcove beneath the staircase. When ever he went about the city or on a journey he never covered his head nor wore shoes. He used an open razor to keep his hair and beard closely cropped. He wore neither shirt nor any other garment beneath the coarse smock tied up on the outside of his rough woollen breeches. He never rode a beast on his journeys nor at any other place, even when he was footsore and weary. From the day that he began serving Our Lord until he called him to

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<sup>67</sup> J-L. Vives, *On public assistance for the poor* (De subventionem pauperum), Brussels, 1943.

<sup>68</sup> Castro, *op.cit.* XIV (Translation by Bro. Benedict O'Grady OH).

himself, he never covered his head but went about both bareheaded and barefooted, even in rain and snow storms.”

Despite this, John never extolled the state of poverty and was surrounded both by wealthy benefactors, and had considerable – but never enough – resources for his hospital. There was no violent criticism of them, but on the contrary he had an affectionate relationship of friendship with them, which gladly requited. For John, money was a gift of God for his poor people, it was Providence incarnate, embodied in the assets of his benefactors who, thanks to their generosity, also had the opportunity to perform meritorious acts. Ultimately, they were also involved in the work of St John of God, and shared his Charism, as we would put it today.

He certainly did not ask his wealthy friends to give up what they owned, as he himself had done in response to the gospel command, and neither did he condemn their wealth, considering it to be unjust. But what he did do was to ask them to share it with his poor, that is to say, to give their capital the value of a social good.

- *State and society.* Similar considerations also apply to the "social classes". In order to fully understand the ethical and social implications of the life of St John of God we have to describe the structure of 16th century Spanish society.<sup>69</sup>

The most important social class was the aristocracy, which enjoyed great social prestige and above all exemption from paying taxes (like the doctors of philosophy from one of the three great Spanish universities). The aristocracy was subdivided into three "subclasses":

- the titled nobility (dukes, counts, marquesses, etc) numbering not more than about thirty families at the beginning of the century;
- then the members of the knightly military orders (*caballeros*) (Santiago, Calatrava, Alcántara, etc); the vassals who lived on income from their feudal property rights; the urban oligarchy that governed the large towns;
- lastly, another category of knights (*hidalgos*) who were landless aristocrats, possessing only a noble title, and enjoying exemption from taxes. Very often it was possible to become an *hidalgo* by legal means, acquiring the title, and also by illegal means, by removing to a city where they were completely unknown.

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<sup>69</sup> J. Pérez, *La España del siglo XVI*, Anaya, Madrid 1991.

The second category that enjoyed great social prestige were the *letrados* (literally "men of letters") who had generally completed their legal studies and occupied many senior positions in the civil service. Not being members of the aristocracy they were often ashamed of their humbler origins, and tried to acquire the title of *hidalgo*.

How did St John of God work his way around this world? He simply accepted it as a fact, without pointing fingers, but at the same time as I have already shown, using the financial resources it was able to offer him. It is interesting to see that he really was a "friend" of so many aristocrats and see the way they requited his friendship, not only in purely financial terms but also by giving him their affection. The injustice of the social system which gave such privileges to the wealthy, enabling them to become even wealthier (thanks to fiscal exemption) and making the poor become increasingly poorer, was never an issue.

There was passive acceptance of the *status quo* by the poor he cared for, and by his benefactors. All the poor could do, as Castro insightfully reminds us, "was cry and moan, as people who only knew how to react to unfair misfortune except with groans in tears"<sup>70</sup> while even though the others were very generous and willing to help, they certainly had no concept of sharing John's service to the poor, except only under exceptional circumstances.

Indeed, it might be interesting to note in this regard how the "existential coordinates" of the *father of the poor* fell paradoxically between two "logistical features" of the aristocracy. The first relates to his first hospital shelter which according to a witness in the beatification process<sup>71</sup> even before he moved to Calle Lucena had been in the vestibule of the house owned by Miguel Venegas, kindly placed at his disposal, before he subsequently offered him a more spacious facility. The second was at the end of his life, in the Los Pisa house, in a wholly comfortable and homely environment, far from the world in which he had lived his life, and in which he would have preferred to die, side-by-side with his poor people.

- *Justice and charity*. These two terms which are linked today, and the mutual dialectical tension between the two, were practically unknown in the age of St John of God even though, it was precisely the Spanish school that had worked out a comprehensive treaty entitled *De justitia e*

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<sup>70</sup> Castro *op. cit.* XX (Translation by Bro. Benedict O'Grady OH)

<sup>71</sup> Testimony of Miguel Venegas (in J. L. Martínez Gil, *op.cit.* 600).

*jure* (Vitoria, Soto, Bañez, Molina, etc.).<sup>72</sup> But there were three limitations on all these theological arguments:

- they were all, to a certain extent, confined to academic circles, and had little influence on real life and on the social fabric;
- they gave pride of place to *commutative* justice (that is to say giving to a the person their due according to their specific status, state of life, membership, etc) rather than distributive justice;
- they considered the existing social itself was "just".

St John of God was the perfect son of his age in this respect, and even though his own life prophetically threw into crisis the three situations just mentioned, it did not have an underlying conceptual foundation and practice, critiquing Such a reductive view of the social justice.

When people spoke about justice as a cardinal virtue (see above) they use the term in a purely commutative sense, highlighting what was due to God and what was due to Caesar.

It is interesting in this regard to read the account of John's meeting with King after travelling to Valladolid, at least as Castro describes it to us:

"As soon as John of God arrived at Court, the Count de Tendilla and the other nobles who knew him, notified the King telling him all about him. When he was admitted to the court he said: 'My Lord, I usually call everyone my brother in Jesus Christ. Since you are my Lord and King I have to obey you, so how do you command me to address you?'

"The King replied: 'John, address me as you wish.' Then because he was the prince and not the King at that time, John of God said: 'Then I shall call you my good Prince. May God give you a good reign and skilful governing good prince. May you end your days well and save your soul and gain heaven.' They conversed for quite some time then he gave an order that alms be given to John. The Infantas, his sisters, and their ladies in waiting came to see him every day and also gave him some. They presented him with a good quantity of jewels and alms which he distributed to the needy poor there at Valladolid."<sup>73</sup>

There are various aspects in relation to this meeting that deserve our attention. First of all, the formal and unambiguous homage he paid to the King: "Since you are my Lord and King I have to obey you", which remains so even after the King had told him to "address me as you wish". Considering that he had previously said that he called everyone his brother, he could have called the King "my brother", but he did not dare go

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<sup>72</sup> M. Vidal *L'atteggiamento morale*, Cittadella, Assisi, 1997, 3, 43 *et seq.*

<sup>73</sup> Castro *op. cit.* XVI. Translation by Bro. Benedict O'Grady OH.

that far. When he did address the King he began by invoking God's blessing on him, making him a sound ruler, giving him a good life and a good end. Almost a formula for success that he may worked out while on his way to the Palace. Unfortunately we do not know anything about the interesting part of their conversation, except that "they conversed for quite some time". The fact remains that as a result of their conversation, the whole court gave him generous alms. Perhaps one might have expected some "institutionally social" intervention on the part of King, rather than pure charity, but history is what it is, and it follows its natural course. In those days it was unthinkable to have had such generous help of this kind, and earning the future admiration of King was in itself a most important outcome.

## 4. TODAY

**4.1 *Distinctive features of St John of God's ethics.*** The analytical research conducted so far gives rise to the risk of causing us to lose sight of the overall vision we need in order to have a comprehensive overview of John of God's ethics. In light of the elements indicated above we can therefore identify a number of key features of John of God's proposal and moral life:

- *The primacy of charity.* The whole of St John of God's existence was radically marked by the exercise of charity, expressed in terms of both the theological and moral virtue. From his own personal experience of God's mercy he radically renewed his "existential status" by making charity the standard for everything he did, devoting his whole life to this. Even before the few teachings he has left us in his letters and in his verbal exhortations, of which no trace remains, it was his life that stands as the great testimony to charity. Testimony, but also exhortation which encouraged his first companions to emulate him, and aroused the sensitivities of the citizens of Granada and other cities in Spain, attracting the attention of the Royal family, and the generosity of nobles and benefactors.
- *Ecclesial mediation.* Consistently with the religious sensitivities of his age, the ethical dimensions of his thinking and acting were also strongly set within the context of the Church. Even though his letters make numerous references to the Word of God, this appealed to his own conscience and that of his benefactors in a context of ecclesial mediation at all times. And this was the most genuine spirituality of the age whose fidelity to the Gospel was very largely commensurate with the teachings of the Church. Any direct appeal, however lawful, from Holy Scripture, was implicitly

of thought that was frowned upon, and even suspected of being heretical. At all events, Holy Scripture which was proclaimed in written in Latin alone made it only directly accessible to the people who knew Latin, that is to say the clergy, who then proclaimed it and handed it on to the people.

- *Ascetical implications.* The whole of John of God's "moral proposal" is rooted in the way of life strongly marked by a rigid ascetical character. From one point of view, this was an element of great modernity. The compact character of theological thought before the Council of Trent worse broken up in the articulation of various forms of knowledge (dogmatic, moral, spiritual theology etc). While this had a major and productive impact on the didactic and speculative articulation of theology, the same cannot be said of its practice which now appear fragmented, making it difficult to recompose into a unity for human action. This strict linkage between ethics and spirituality in St John of God is therefore great interest, and was ahead of its times. But inevitably his spiritual experience was the product of the ascetical thought of his times and could hardly been otherwise. It is no coincidence that one of his main exhortations to the Duchess of Sessa regarding the three great evils of the flesh, the devil and the world<sup>74</sup> perfectly reflected the teachings of his master, St John of Avila, who used this threefold breakdown as the very basis for the first part of his *Audi filia*.<sup>75</sup>
- *Christological roots.* Lastly, and this is also the mark of a certain type of modernity, John of God's moral path is Christologically rooted. We find it sometimes only implicitly indicated, but at other times it is more explicit:

"Trust only in Jesus Christ. Cursed be the person who trusts in men, because whether he will or no he will be abandoned by men, but not by Jesus Christ, who is faithful and endures for ever: everything passes away except for good works."<sup>76</sup>

But John's ethical commitment was never pure philanthropy. Loving and welcoming in others which would subsequently be structured in the Charism of Hospitality, were always placed in the dimension of faith and the *sequela Christi*. It was love for his neighbour in a profound relationship of love for God. But once again, the perspective in which he practised this Christological reference was marked by the spirituality of his age which was strongly run through by the exaltation of pain. John's Christ was above all the Crucified,

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<sup>74</sup> III DS, 89.

<sup>75</sup> *Op. cit.*, cf. note 6.

<sup>76</sup> I DS, 6.



rather than the Risen, Christ. And this is the Christ with which he most immediately identified himself, looking at the many crucified people he cared for every day, and the sufferings and the discomfort that he and his companions had to endure in order to nurse them.

**4.2 Charismatic ethics, yesterday and today.** The theological identity of a Charism bequeathed to an Institute of Consecrated Life by its founder has three fundamental features:

- *Ecclesiality*. The Charism is a gift which God makes to the Church (and through the Church to the whole world) embodying it in the vocational dynamic of a saint and entrusting it to the Religious family founded by or inspired by that same saint. As such, the Institute is a faithful custodian of the Charism, accountable to God for its stewardship, while sharing it in the ecclesial communion.
- *Expansivity*. The Charism is *expansivus sui*. In other words, it cannot be wholly enclosed in the members of a Religious family (that is to say, its canonical members) but from them and through them it flows outwards to everyone else who, in one capacity or another, participates in its apostolic work. There are obviously various degrees of participation, from the most remote and purely implicit participation, to more direct participation, which can also be given specific forms of ecclesial recognition.
- *Dynamicity*. The Charism is not something static, given once and for all, in the form and ways in which it was manifested or donated to the founder. Indeed, in many instances the worst possible way of keeping it alive would be to keep to it literally (for example by applying it to the letter, as the Founder did, such as walking barefoot, sleeping with one's head on a stone, picking up the people in the street and carrying them etc). It is wonderful to see how, throughout the centuries, this has had repercussions in devotional iconography. For in addition to the traditional images of St John of God carrying a patient on his shoulders (which no-one would do today) there are others with him watching by the side of the sick person, lying on his own bed, with a blanket and pillow, or by the paralytic who is not leaning on some make-shift crutch but sitting in a wheelchair. The Charism therefore changes its face as times change, retaining the essence of its identity but also transforming, sometimes radically so, the historical ways in which the Charism has been put into practice.

These considerations are essential for an understanding of the significance of updating the Charism by reference to its most specific ethical implications. St

John of God's ethics that we have already analysed, in terms of the beginning and the historical expression of those ethical principles, now needs to be updated in terms of the different contexts in which the Order is working today. The Charter of Hospitality already offers us a detailed and thorough analysis, and a great deal has already been written about the "style of care" introduced by St John of God. It would therefore be pointless repeating what has already been said, or summarising what has already been written with such authority. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the "John of God inspiration" underlying the main thrusts of an ethos practised in the course of our daily care work, returning to the roots of our Charism also in relation to the moral perspectives that have never been thoroughly examined in the past. The rest still remains to be planned and implemented, and the gift discovered. The wealth of the Charism, at all events, is such that it can be examined in new environments and in new areas and terms that have hitherto not been thoroughly explored. These reflections have only one purpose, namely, to offer a modest contribution to that end.

- *Ethical priorities.* The most appropriate way of ending this paper is to provide an updated perspective of the ethical dimensions described above. It is not easy but because the direct updating in a contemporary register would be inappropriate, will also because it would be particularly difficult to do and at all events falls outside the scope of this paper, apart from the fact that it would mortify the ethical-pastoral creativity of the present path the Order is taking. Furthermore, the Order's *Charter of Hospitality* has already amply set defined the interconnections between the various moral issues that affect today's work of the Hospitaller Family. We shall therefore merely point out a number of ethical priorities which, following the experience of St John of God, are able to offer a number of fundamental ethical demands, embodied in the changed historical contexts. Every individual and every Centre possessing his Charism is then required to view this multifaceted ethical commitment in terms of the challenges of daily life.

- *Institutional charity.* One important passage in the Gospel story of the Good Samaritan is when he entrusts the wounded man to the innkeeper. This is the moment in which the individual dimension of charity is transformed into social charity or, as we might put it today, socio-political charity. It is important to see this twin dimension in the work of St John of God, whose Charism was the Charism of *Hospitality*, not nursing sick people in generic terms. As we have already seen when speaking about the ethical sources of John of God's ethics, his Charism cannot be fully understood if it is detached from these social aspects of it. The Order's present position in history can therefore not be examined without reference to its institutional dimension, its

social political environment and the is dialogue with governmental bodies and other health care institutions. If, as Paul VI said, "politics is the highest form of charity", embodying the charity to which John of God bore witness means participating fully in this dimension.

In purely Hospitaller terms, the Order must consider the effort to constantly improve the quality of its services to achieve excellence as a moral imperative. The momentous changes taking place all the time must translate into renewed commitment that is able to take up the insights and the prophetic spirit of the work of St John of:

"In order to help the beggars and itinerants, he set up a night shelter where they could sleep at night and shelter from the cold. This had its own kitchen and was so large and well appointed that it could comfortably shelter two hundred people. they all enjoyed the warmth of its hearth and there were stretchers to sleep upon. others used mattresses or palliasses and when it was necessary, some slept upon mats. All this is going on this day at the hospital."<sup>77</sup>

In those ages it was already a great deal to offer them somewhere warm to stay, and a mattress to sleep on, because the sick had other alternative, and there was no one else to do it. Otherwise it is impossible to explain the large numbers of people cared for in (more than 200 poor people were mentioned in this extract, more than 100 according to his letters). Today, in the nature of public and private care, often of a high quality, the Order's ethical commitment should be to offer a quality of care that is never inferior to the quality offered by other facilities, and indeed is able to take the lead. In the varied panorama of its different types of care facilities, while some are simple and are very similar indeed to those provided by John of God (shelters and hostels for the ball, homes, etc, particularly in the developing countries) there are others, such as the large hospitals in the industrialised world where guaranteeing service quality and must be one of the Order's primary objectives.

- *Searching out the new poor.* St John of God did not wait for the sick to knock on his door, but went out into the street to find them. Today's social dynamics, at least in the industrialised countries, have now confine such a practice to groups of volunteers who go out to gather up the homeless to give them some initial assistance. In other parts of the world, on the other hand there are still huge pockets of poverty where people do not have any access to healthcare services in which must be identified and although to bring them primary health care. But in both these situations, the example set by John of God has to be followed going out to search not so much for people suffering from

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<sup>77</sup> Castro *Op. cit.* XIV. Translated by Brother Benedict O'Grady, O.H.

"poverty" in the traditional sense of the term (people suffering from a financial, material and healthcare needs, for example) but rather the "new poor". And if a "preferential choice of the poor" is what the Church wishes to embody, following the example of John of God is new forms of poverty must necessarily be included.

"People suffering from all sorts of diseases, men and women, were cared for without any discrimination at all (just as they do today). there are people with fevers, skin diseases and wounds, the homeless and children suffering the effects of malnutrition. then there are also the foundlings left on the doorstep." <sup>78</sup>

John of God looked after people suffering from many types of diseases which no longer exist today, with many new *infirmities* have now emerged and are calling out the Hospitaller Order today. Many of these were rare or unknown in his day (also because the average lifespan was so short). One only has to think of many of the cancers, degenerative neurological diseases, rare illnesses, dis-metabolic diseases, sexually transmitted diseases, the new viral diseases, dependencies and addictions (not only the "traditional" forms of addiction to psychotropic substances, tobacco and alcohol, but also the Internet, videogames, compulsive shopping, etc), eating disorders, etc.

- *A new universal outreach.* Until only a few decades ago it was thought that the breakdown of material and ideological barriers and walls would lead to a new age of brotherhood. But the collapse was followed by the construction of new barriers, which are perhaps even more difficult to break down: forms of ethnocentrism (sometimes pushed to the extreme of causing all-out ethnic conflict) the new wars of religion, the many restrictions placed on immigration, intolerance of religious or cultural diversity, etc.

Spain, in the age of St John of God, was passing through a difficult phase of transition: the Arabs had been driven out of Granada, which had been their final stronghold in the Iberian peninsular, with many of us stayed on, accepting to a certain extent the Christian traditions and customs (*moriscos*). Similarly, after the Jews had been driven out, many of them had converted to Christianity, sometimes only outwardly, or by force (*marrani*). John of God therefore lived in a multicultural, multi-ethnic and multifaith society, just like our own.

But there is no trace of any of this in John of God's work. Did all those 100-200 people being cared for possess "clean blood" (*limpieza de sangre*)? I doubt

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<sup>78</sup> *Castro Op. cit.* XIV. Translated by Brother Benedict O'Grady, O.H.

that very much, particularly in the case of the pilgrims who came from all over the world.

“Since this house is for everybody, without making any distinctions we take in people suffering from every disease and people of every type, so that there are cripples, the maimed, lepers, mutes, the insane, paralytics, people with ringworm, and also very old people and many children - and this is without counting the large numbers of other pilgrims and wayfarers who come here and to whom we give fire, water, salt, and pots, so that they can cook..”<sup>79</sup>

Today of course, at least on paper, no healthcare structure can discriminate or practise any form of exclusion. But if this is true in formal terms, we cannot be sure that this is actually the case. Once again we probably have to present ourselves with a surplus of charity and make our care effectively non-discriminatory, not only because no discrimination is practised in the shelters or homes, or in the provision of care, but because the same welcome is extended to people of different cultures, religions, attitudes, spiritual needs, dietary habits, etc.

- *Ethical testimony.* As far as the issues we are dealing with here are concerned, the present age is marked by twin critical issue. In healthcare terms these range from huge financial problems in the health care systems of the whole world, which are particularly acute in some countries, to a certain “mistrust” on the part of the public towards healthcare. In ecclesial terms, there is a widespread lack of confidence in, lack of esteem of, and suspicion against Church institutions because of the many scandals in which the Catholic Church has been embroiled in recent years.

Since the Hospitaller Order is involved on both fronts, it has a twin responsibility both to bear witness through good quality healthcare, and at the same time to show the best face of the Church and thereby contribute to restoring her credibility:

“As John of God's charitable work increased, so too did the recourses and needs of the house. Many important people both at Granada and beyond, began to take notice of it. They particularly noticed John's perseverance and his good management which kept on growing from good to better. they noticed that not only was he giving shelter to itinerants and the homeless, he also set beds apart for the sick to be nursed. He was given credit to buy necessities for the poor and alms began to flow in far more than before. These took the form of blankets, sheets, pillows, clothing and other items.”<sup>80</sup>

St John of God was not a man of culture and he did not attract people through learning discourses and theological disputations, but rather through his

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<sup>79</sup> 2 GL 5.

<sup>80</sup> Castro, Chapter XII (The First Biography of St. John of God, by Francisco de Castro: Translated by Brother Benedict O'Grady, O.H.

example. And since “the world believes in witnesses more than teachers”<sup>81</sup> it is essential for the Order to fully respond again to this demand.

Additionally, faced with the degree of impoverishment of the moral proposal and on the part of individual believers or ecclesial movements, which are wholly absorbed by “borderline” ethical issues (‘the beginning and the end of life’) it is becoming urgently necessary to bear witness to a wide-ranging ethical system referring to the whole of the existential environment of the individual person.

- *Towards moral excellence.* One perhaps less evident strong point in comparison with the previous ones, which clearly emerges from the moral conduct of John of God, has to do with that synthesis of ethics and spirituality which we have already mentioned. The practice of charity towards the poor, even if it is wholly so absorbing as to leave “no room to recite the Creed”<sup>82</sup> becomes a higher form of spirituality in its own right, a synthesis between action (perhaps more evident) and contemplation.

The work performed by the Order today and by all the people involved in its facilities should therefore aim at this form of moral perfection which is the specific commitment of the believer. And since the great Hospitaller Family is made up of people involved other than in a faith commitment capacity (and even people without any faith whatsoever) we must always ensure that care for the sick or in any other kind of need becomes in all instances an opportunity for interior perfection, human improvement and better relations. There is implicitly charitable dimension in this concern for others even on the part of those who do not share our faith: “he who loves is born of God and knows God” (1 Jn 4,7).

In terms of pastoral care and Evangelisation the ethical dimension takes on the paramount role in this regard and the Order becomes not only a promoter of good health care and charitable welfare in the world, but also part of holiness for all those who play a part in one way or another in its mission.

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<sup>81</sup> Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, no. 41.

<sup>82</sup> I Letter to Gutierre Lasso, 20.



# THE ETHICS OF ST JOHN OF GOD

