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*Priore Generale*

Rome, 23 May 2010  
Ref. PG047/2010

## PENTECOST 2010

*And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. Acts 2, 3-4*

**To the whole Order: Brothers, Co-workers, Volunteers and Benefactors and all those we serve through the Charism of Hospitality**

My dear Brothers and Sisters in Hospitality,

Fifty days have passed since Easter when we celebrated the victory of Christ over sin and death, and we have now reached the Solemnity of Pentecost, when the Church was established and received the gift of the Holy Spirit which creates unity in love and respect for mutual diversity. Since that time different cultures and languages have been incorporated into the Church. These can understand one another through faith in the Risen Christ and through His Spirit, and all of us are witnesses to this great gift of the universality of the Church: the Church speaks the languages of every nation. The universal reality of our Order is living testimony of this. The feast of the Holy Spirit is also the Feast Day of the Church and the feast of our great Family of Saint John of God<sup>1</sup>.

The presence of the Spirit in our mission is evident from the fact that the mission has branched out to every part of the world bearing witness to the fact that it has never had such a widespread presence in the past among sick, poor and needy people.

As an Order we are in the front line in proclaiming the Church to the least. This is what Jesus wished. Our mission leads us to people who suffer from a wide range of illnesses and needs e.g. people who suffer from AIDS, those who have psychiatric and mental health issues, the elderly, the homeless, the poor and hungry, children and adults who have an intellectual disability, and so many others living in a state of need.

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<sup>1</sup> Const 2; 41;

As followers of John of God all of us need to see things positively and try to give heart to people in situations in which there is opposition, resistance and fear. These often hamper and slow down the mission because the world needs to be humanised today more than ever before. So many people feel disenfranchised and humiliated for various reasons ranging from ill health to dire financial straits. So many others feel vulnerable and defenceless in a society which fails to take care of them and even tends to marginalise them. The Spirit of the Risen Christ is sending us out to these people precisely to bring them the hope of the Good News.

Before Jesus left this world, he gave a parting gift to his followers and to all of us i.e. his peace! Jesus' peace is contained in the challenge of unlimited loving service, compassionate inclusion, courageous integrity and generous hospitality. John-of-God-Hospitality can be a wonderful *instrument of peace*! When one analyses what *peace* really means and the great need that our world has for peace, it is evident that it is one of the fruits of a *hospitable society* as John of God would have envisioned it. The contrary is also true. A society that does not provide for its weakest members is a society that is not at peace with itself, it is a society where there is violence, abuse of power, traffic of people – even children, slave labour, corruption, manipulation of the uninformed and of information, marginalisation of minorities and abandonment of the weak. Because we are called to make the Church present in these situations we need to be creative and to work with anyone who shares our philosophy and values. We must be prepared to network with other agencies and promote new forms of non-hospital care. The constant evolution of medicine and the social science also holds up a real challenge to us to evangelise in the spirit of Hospitality<sup>2</sup> in all circumstance and places.

Before Pentecost and receiving the Holy Spirit the disciples of Jesus were full of fear. They hid behind locked doors, terrified that what had happened to Jesus could be their lot as well. But after receiving the gift of the Spirit their eyes and hearts were opened and their faith strengthened. Emboldened by the presence of the Spirit they began to launch out enthusiastically on their mission to bear witness to, and be proclaimers of the Good News to the ends of the earth – as they knew it in those days.

We too are living through a time of great change, a tsunami of change that could be so overwhelming for some people that they could end up like the disciples withdrawing into themselves and the security of their houses terrified of what the Gospel of mercy and hospitality might require of them at this critical time in our history.

It is true it calls for many sacrifices, to let go of past sureties and familiar ways of doing things, to feel the insecurity of not knowing exactly where the road we are on is leading us and how it is going to end. While it is understandable from a human point of view to feel vulnerable and therefore tempted to withdraw into oneself, this would not be a very missionary thing to do. At times like this we are called to renew our faith in the presence of Jesus in our lives and the power of the Holy Spirit to transform and heal even our deepest fears. We must also reach out and be receptive to the Spirit, and realise that,

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<sup>2</sup> General Statues 19

in the words of Saint Paul in his letter to the Romans, the spirit is in everyone<sup>3</sup> and is everywhere. Let us trust the Spirit, allowing him to work in each one of us, listen to what he has to say through others, try to interpret the signs of the times and especially listen to what he is telling us through our sick and needy brothers and sisters<sup>4</sup>.

This will lead to a *new Pentecost* for our Order; it will release fresh energy, a new direction, innovative ideas, new expressions of, and enthusiasm for, the mission of Hospitality. This new *Pentecost experience* will help to shape the future of our Hospitaller Family and how it lives out its mandate “to manifest the Charism of Hospitality in the spirit of Saint John of God in the world of today” (Const: Act of Foundation 1g). In this way an ever increasing number of people who have lost their human dignity will have it restored to them by the way they are treated, cared for and provided for by the followers of John of God. At a deeper level they will come to know “the love of Christ (for them) ... and be filled with the very fullness of God.” (Eph 3: 18-19)

When I reflect on human dignity I recall, many years ago, the annual visit that the novices and I paid to a beautiful island just one kilometre from the coast of South Korea. This island was home to about 600 people at that time, although now that has changed. These were no ordinary people. They suffered from **Hansen's disease** (leprosy). The understanding of the time was that this disease was contagious, so anyone who suffered from “leprosy” had to be isolated to live in specified villages or be sent to this island. Even though it was, and is, a most beautiful island (it is no longer used for that purpose), for the people who were sent there to live in isolation it was like a prison. Every year we spent two months working in the hospital. Because there were few staff members and limited resources our presence was welcomed by the authorities and, above all, by the patients.

Anyone who has seen the films ‘Damien the Leper’, or ‘Damien of Molokai’ will be aware of the devastating nature of the disease we call leprosy. Of course now, thanks to medical advances, leprosy can be successfully treated like any other illness that human beings suffer from. However, if not treated quickly it can have devastating results because it is a slowly progressing bacterial infection that affects the skin, peripheral nerves in the hands and feet and the mucous membranes of the nose.

While the people we met on the island were physically deformed and many of them were psychologically devastated because of isolation from their families and society they cared for and helped each other. One could see the humanity they harboured within themselves which made it possible for them to accept their situation with a certain amount of tranquillity. Many found comfort in their faith. Working with these marginalised people taught me to appreciate the interior beauty and immense dignity of every human being. I am sure that similar experiences have taught the same to many of you who continue the work of John of God in the midst of suffering humanity. I believe that we have to heighten our awareness of the dignity of every human being whom Our

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<sup>3</sup> Romans 8: 9.

<sup>4</sup> Pierluigi Marchesi, Humanisation

Lord places before us along our path and to see their inner beauty. The grace or insight that John of God received was to understand that illness, deformity or disability cannot destroy or diminish the inner beauty of the individual, because all are made in God's image and likeness, passionately loved by God and destined to be with him forever in heaven.

The difficult trials of sickness, poverty and vulnerability that we have to confront must drive us on ever more to rediscover the roots of our vocation: to question ourselves as to why the Lord has called us. This arduous spiritual path demands constant personal prayer which will lead us, through our meeting with people in need or those who are sidelined from society, towards genuine interior renewal and a *new Pentecost* of the Order and the Church.

Let us ask Our Blessed Mother to pray for us, as she did for and with the apostles, that the Holy Spirit will open our hearts also to the Word of God so that by listening carefully we shall be able to conform ourselves increasingly to the mind of the merciful Christ and rediscover the greatness of our vocation in Hospitality, as the sign of hope in a world which needs genuine humanity.

Together with the General Government of the Order, our Hospitaller Family at the General Curia, I send my very best wishes for the feast of Pentecost to all the members of the Saint John of God Family. I pray that each of you, your loved ones - especially those for whom you have a particular concern at this time – will receive abundant blessings on Pentecost Day!

I remain as always fraternally yours in Saint John of God.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Donatus Forkan OH". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial 'D' and 'F'.

Brother Donatus Forkan OH,  
Prior General