THE HOSPITALLER FAMILY OF SAINT JOHN OF GOD.

"We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty."
(Luke 17:10).

October 09th. 2012
Feast of the Holy Rosary
Prot No PG111/2012

My dear brothers and sisters in Hospitality,

Preamble

Within a very short period of time our 68th General Chapter will commence in Fatima, Portugal – on October 22nd to be more precise! Chapters, be they Provincial Chapters or General Chapters, bring to a close the mandate of all who were elected at the previous Chapter. This means that the mandate of the present General Government i.e. the Prior General, the General Councillors, the Secretary General and the Postulator General of the Order who were elected or appointed at the 2006 General Chapter will come to an end. In other words, irrespective of whether or not some members of the present team are re-elected or appointed, the six year mandate of this present team concludes at the 2012 General Chapter.

Before leaving for the Chapter, however, I would like to reflect and share with you some of what has happened over the past six years and draw some relevant conclusions. I want to share this with those of you in particular who will not be at the General Chapter in Fatima. That, of course, is the vast majority of the membership of the Family of Saint John of God. For obvious reasons I will have to be selective and brief even though there is much to share and much to celebrate. I will also try to identify some factors and challenges that will require a synergy of effort and unity of purpose over the coming years.

I should like to give the reader a global perspective of where we are today in the world and some of the events that are helping to shape the way we will be tomorrow. Right away I would like to state that I have a very positive view of the future of the Hospitaller Family of Saint John of God. I see it as one that is full of hope and limitless opportunities for expressing John-of-God-Hospitality although I do not deny the fact there are many challenges to be faced over the coming years. The direction that we need to go in tomorrow can be judged to the degree that we are faithful to the
mission of Hospitality today. Present Hospitallers are the ones that are shaping the way Hospitality will be lived tomorrow when they are faithful to, and driven by, the vision and dream of John today.

Report to General Chapter

First of all I would like to say something about my report to the General Chapter. The report is necessarily a lengthy one that covers a wide range of issues related to the current state of the Order, how the mandate we received at the 2006 General Chapter was exercised and some of the activities of the sexennium 2006-2012. The matter of formation which is always a concern for us receives particular attention in the report. As the Co-workers are now co-responsible with the Brothers for the mission of the Order it is necessary to provide them with the necessary education and formation that will enable them to come to know and identify with Saint John of God whose work they are continuing.

In the report I also dwell on the renewal process, where we are at today in this regard and the direction we need to take in the immediate future. I report on the re-structuring process that has taken place over the past six years and it is quite substantive. Re-structuring in this context means an entity i.e. a religious community(ies) and apostolic services, either joining an existing Province or the formation of a new Province through the amalgamation of two Provinces of the Order and forming a ‘new’ Province or another entity.

An important activity over the past period was the twinning, and other forms of international cooperation, between sister services in the developing countries and those of Europe. This process is ongoing, mutually enriching and a wonderful expression of Hospitality. An interesting development in recent times, despite the reduction in the number of Brothers, is that Provinces have found new and imaginative ways to sustain projects in new places or brought, for the first time, John-of-God-Hospitality to new lands.

In addition to my written report to the Chapter, thanks to the cooperation we received from across the Order, we have been able to make a DVD that tells the story of the Family of Saint John of God worldwide over a span of 50 years. This was not an easy task by any standards, but we felt it was important to try to give a global visual perspective of the Family of Saint John of God to those assembled in Chapter. In the DVD one can hear the views of different Hospitallers on what has changed us and just how much we have changed since the Second Vatican Council. One also can identify with those who have made sacrifices by letting go of the well tried ways of the past in order to take on the new and to revitalise the religious life by bringing the way we live and serve the mission into the modern world enabling it to be a force for good and evangelisation. This of course is very much a work in progress and, while much has been achieved, the updating and adapting to new challenges and changing circumstances will continue to demand sacrifice, fidelity to vocation, generosity of spirit, creativity and vision.

In addition to the report of the Prior General to the Chapter, to complete the process of rendering an account of our stewardship to the General Chapter as a team, which is the highest authority of the Order, each General Councillor as Commission President and those who have had particular responsibility within the General Government will also present their report to the Chapter. These reports have already been circulated for personal study to all those going to the Chapter. Following the presentations by the members of the General Government an open forum will be held during which comments may be made or questions put to any of the presenters to seek clarification etc.
Important events that had a bearing on our life and ministry

I should now like to highlight some of the more significant events that impacted on the life of our Hospitaller Family in recent times. Obviously, what occurred locally for individuals, communities and the services they provide might have impacted in a positive or negative manner locally, but may not have a corresponding in another part of the world where we have a presence. While recognising that life is lived wherever one is situated, for the purpose of this letter I will try to confine myself to the larger and more global picture and events that have had a bearing to a lesser or greater extent on us as an international Family.

There is a saying, author unknown, that states when a butterfly flaps its wings in one part of the world it can cause a hurricane in another part of the world! Today more than ever before in history we live in a global village and therefore the effects of change are immediate and felt instantly across the world like the flap of the butterfly’s wings! I could give you many examples, you know them yourself, but I will confine myself to just a few.

The one event that had the greatest impact on our life as Religious Brothers and on those who together with the Brothers are followers of Saint John of God, and indeed the entire church, is the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). Pursuing the renewal or aggiornamento called for by the Council changed the way we live as religious and the manner in which Hospitality is exercised almost beyond recognition. It can be said therefore, that the Council more than any other event in our almost half a millennium of existence helped to change the face of the Order. It had a huge impact on the way Religious live their lives in general, how they minister and where they work.

- Role of the Laity in the church

In my opinion however, the Council’s teaching on the role of the laity in the church in its document Lumen Gentium and subsequent Papal documents is, what will continue to have the greatest impact on the life of the church into the future. We are at a time when a more confident laity is tentatively beginning to emerge. I say tentative not, not on the part of the laity but rather the reluctance is on the part of the church hierarchy. As far back as 1943 Pope Pius XII stated that “The laity are in the front line of Church life; for them the Church is the animating principle of human society. Therefore, they in particular ought to have an ever-clearer consciousness not only of belonging to the Church, but of being the Church…”1 I will return to this point later because of its importance for us.

- Serious approach to renewal

The Hospitaller Order of Saint John of God took seriously the Council’s mandate that all religious institutes renew themselves and the Council gave them a blue print on how to go about it – return to the sacred scriptures, reflect on the original inspiration of the institute i.e. the founder, and read the signs of the times. This is not the place to go into detail on the process that the Order engaged in to renew itself but I will confine myself rather to the effects that renewal had on the lives of the Brothers and the mission of Hospitality over the past six years in particular. I don’t think it is not an exaggeration to refer to the changes that have occurred as truly astonishing and historic.

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1 Pius XII, Discourse, February 20, 1946
• ‘Re-discovery’ of John of God

I have stated on numerous occasions that for us the re-discovery of John of God changed everything. I am using re-discovery advisedly; it was as if we sat down with John in the Venegas Porch and listened to him as he shared his vision and dream for the poor, sick and needy brothers and sisters at the close of the 20th and at the beginning of the 21st centuries. I believe this reflection, which was carried out in a variety of ways and at different times, changed the way we came to understand our mission. It also changed the way we began to see ourselves as belonging to an ‘apostolic religious institute’ in the church that had received from God, through his church and Saint John of God, the exceedingly beautiful Charism of Hospitality.

• A tsunami of change

These insights with the pursuant lines of action adopted in order to implement them brought a tsunami of change and adaptation not only in relation to the mission but the way the Brothers lived and our relationship with the Co-workers. Acting on this insight brought us into contact with suffering humanity on a scale unprecedented in our history and not considered even possible for us some years previously. Not everybody within the organization is cognizant of the nature and enormity of the changes that have occurred over the past 50 years or so. We now minister in a much larger landscape involving more people i.e. Co-workers, benefactors, volunteers, sympathizers and friends, than at any time throughout our history. This means that we serve more sick and needy people today than at any time in our past. This we do with a quality, variety and suite of services one could only have dreamt of at the time of Vatican Council. This in turn has led to a dramatic change in the way we, the Brothers live. We have moved from living like ‘monks’; to living like Religious Brothers consecrated in Hospitality to the radical following of Jesus and in a manner that is consistent with this new identity and our understanding of our mission in the church at the beginning of the 21st. century.

Seeing through the ‘eyes of Hospitality’

Over the past six years we have encouraged inclusivity, pluralism and ecumenism in terms of those we serve. This is nothing new of course, but what is new is the ever increasing number of people who identify with the John of God ideal and his vision of the world. This desire to belong, to share the mission, to dream the dream of John has led to the promotion of the idea that we are a Family, the Family of Saint John of God to which those associated with the work of John of God can belong. The year 2010-11 was dedicated to the Family of Saint John of God worldwide and was a great success. Events were organized at Province and local center level in such a way as to demonstrate this fact and to celebrate what we had in common as members of the Family of Saint John of God united in the same mission. The idea of ‘Family’ what it means and what it implies will get special study at our forthcoming General Chapter.

• What co-responsibility means in reality

“What religious did for past generations, they must now do for the forgotten peoples of our own generation”2. I believe this is what our Order is endeavoring to do. From a cursory glance at the Order over the past six years it is evident that a dramatic shift has taken place from a canonical structure in which the Brothers solely were responsible as directors, managers, trustees or Board

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2 The Legacy of Vatican II” by Joan Chittister in Vatican II:
members, to a new type of canonical structure – corporations, holdings, companies and most recently a PJP, which hold in trust the Saint John of God Hospitallers Ministries, in which Co-workers and others are equal members. Today many of the services are structured in such a way so as to ensure their continuance as a ministry of the church and managed in the manner and spirit of Saint John of God even without the presence of Brothers. What this means in reality that not only does the day to day work of Saint John of God continues to be carried out by Lay Hospitallers but increasingly the guidance and direction of these centers and services are also in their hands.

- The fruits of renewal

I see this as progress, the work of the Holy Spirit and one of the fruits of renewal! I say this advisedly because it means that we are implementing the teachings of Vatican II, especially in line with the dogmatic Constitution, Lumen Gentium. I realize that not everybody fully subscribes to this way thinking, but I have a sense that most would agree on the general direction in which the Order is heading. I feel affirmed that the trajectory that the Order has adopted in terms of renewal is the correct one by repeated statements by recent Popes. Here I rely on statements of the present Holy Father, Benedict XVI, in this regard. This is true even if the church hierarchy and the Vatican itself is slow to vigorously pursue the implications of the Pope’s statements in this and other matters related to the place and the role of the laity in the church. In addition to my quote from an address of Pope Pius XII earlier, where it states that the laity not only belong to the Church, they are the Church. Here I wish to quote from our present Holy Father, Benedict XVI, who as recently as August 10th confirms, once again, the place of the laity in the work of evangelization when he sent a message to the Assembly of Lay Catholic Action on the occasion of their VI Assembly. In his message Benedict XVI stated that the laity are co-responsible with the clergy for the work of the church, which is evangelization. He wrote: “This responsibility requires a change in mentality concerning, in particular, the role of the laity in the Church. They should not be considered as merely ‘collaborators’ of the clergy, but as people truly ‘co-responsible’ in the work of the Church.”

The Holy Father goes on to state that it is important that the laity be well-formed and capable of making “their own specific contribution to the mission of the Church, in accordance with the ministries and tasks in which each one takes part in the life of the Church…and in the language of our time, which has been marked by rapid social and cultural changes, calling this “the great challenge of the New Evangelization.”

The Holy Father continues “In this regard, the Dogmatic Constitution Lumen Gentium describes the nature of the relationships between laity and Pastors with the adjective “familiar”: “A great many wonderful things are to be hoped for from this familiar dialogue …. In this way, the whole Church, strengthened by each one of its members, may more effectively fulfil its mission for the life of the world” (n. 37).

This is a very significant statement by the Holy Father, a statement which he also made when he visited the Roman Parish of Saint John of the Cross on March 7th 2010. On that occasion the Holy Father expressed his satisfaction that new ecclesial movements and communities “wish to promote, in regard to the vocations and the role of consecrated persons and the laity, the co-responsibility of all the members of the People of God.”

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3 Da Castel Gandolfo, 10 agosto 2012
Showing leadership

These statements by the Pope need to be acted upon by the local church. We, the Family of Saint John of God as church, should be giving, and I believe we are giving a lead in this regard. The approval of the Congregation for Consecrated Life of the Order’s new canonical structure, PJP – Saint John of God Hospitaller Ministries, on June 30th, the Feast of Hospitaller Martyrs, is an indication of how far we have traveled along this road. Of course this has huge implications, not just organizationally, but attitudinally. In particular it means the letting go of, or freeing ourselves from, an outdated ‘monastic model’. This served us well from the foundation of the Order but is now archaic, unsuitable and outside of the reality of today.

The putting in place of new structures throughout the Order means that the role of the Brother has changed. It also means that the role of the Co-worker has also changed. The members of the laity or staff are no longer to be seen as mere collaborators with the Brothers but rather as being co-responsible for the mission of Hospitality. As the Holy Father states, this calls for a change in mentality, a change of attitude which will also require ‘formation of the heart’.

Experience has shown us that for renewal to be effective and last the test of time it must being within, in the heart of the individual. It is in this sacred place a ‘sanctuary reserved to God alone’ (Saint John of God) renewal, metanoia – changing the way of thinking, relating and acting begins. An ongoing deepening in the relationship with a personal God will result in a new way of viewing the world, i.e. seeing it through the eyes of God. From this a profound love for God, and instinctively for Hospitallers, a passion for suffering humanity will gradually ensue. Sacrifices and necessary changes and adaptations to structures are made willingly to ensure the missio Dei – God’s work, continues. In the past some religious saw renewal as merely something external, having to do with the horarium, dress and structures but like the house built on sand that Jesus refers to this approach was the cause of dissallusement and a loss of direction for many religious.

Seeing ourselves in this light calls for a mature faith, firm hope and solid formation. It also invites the Brothers to rejoice in and actively engage in the ‘ministry of encouragement’, of all who continue in any way the work of John of God. On the part of the Co-workers it requires a clear understanding and acceptance of the mission as presented by the Order, and to be motivated in service by its philosophy and act in line with the values that underpin the mission. Each Brother is called to be the protagonist, the willing architect, the one who actively promotes this movement, rather than reluctantly acquiesce to decisions taken by others. We, as a brotherhood, are in the happy position of being able to serve as a bridge between different groupings within the church; on behalf of the institutional or hierarchical church to be at the interface with civil society and in the spirit of ecumenism with other religions and so on. We should demonstrate a new way of relating to other members inside the church that is based on our common baptism which makes us brothers and sisters of Christ and each other. “Religious Brothers are effective reminders... of the fundamental dimension of Brotherhood in Christ, to be lived among themselves and with every man and woman and they proclaim to all the Lord’s words: ‘you are all brothers’.

In a word the Brother of Saint John of God needs to demonstrate by the example of his life and the quality of his relationships, how the clergy, the laity and the hierarchy should live out in practice what the Holy Father proposes guided by the vision of Vatican II.

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4 Holy Father’s encyclical Deus Caritas Est. 31a
5 Mathew 7:24-27;
6 Acts 9: Barnabas is named Son of Encouragement because the Apostles saw the ministry of encouragement in him.
7 Mt 23.8; Vita Consecrata No. 60.
Good progress made, but only the beginning

We are only at the beginning of this process, so we have to continue to humbly engage in dialogue, listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit in each other and endeavor to interpret the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel. I am convinced that, should we continue to proceed down this road, God will send us sufficient Brothers to be the leaven in the midst of the Family of Saint John of God, providing encouragement to all, especially those who have major responsibility for the mission, to be a radical witness to what is at the heart of the Gospel message and to be a constant, visible link with John of God who is our ‘Polar Star’.

I realize that what I have presented here is a very incomplete picture of the reality of the Family of Saint John of God today, but I hope you have been able to get a sense of the enormous amount of good that is visible in the world today thanks to the commitment of so many Hospitallers. Obviously, there are real concerns related to the ongoing economic crisis, the sustainability of many of our services, the lack of vocations to our brotherhood in some countries, the adequate preparation and formation of all Hospitallers, the need to update the management and administrative structures of some of our centers. The great challenge that we face into the future is to continue to be faithful to the vision and dream of John of God. In order to ensure and guarantee the future in terms of the mission and the ongoing formation of Lay Hospitallers in particular, a change of mentality and an element of risk taking are essential.

Some words of gratitude

On behalf the General Government of the Order I wish to sincerely thank all those who have generously cooperated with us in the animation, guidance and governance of the Order internationally. There are so many of you who have served on international commissions, which meant travelling frequently to Rome for meetings. The organization of the Regional Conferences, General Canonical Visitations and in so many other ways many of you have contributed greatly to making the task of animation so much more effective.

On a personal level I should like to thank everybody, each member of our great Hospitaller Family, for the support that you have given to me throughout my six year term. It has been an enormous privilege to have had the opportunity to serve as Prior General. People, on occasion, ask me ‘where do you get your strength from?’ My response was, and is, simple: prayer and seeing the work of John of God continuing in a manner that he undoubtedly approves of – this invariable energies me, no matter the difficulties or challenges that have to be faced. Each morning I have an hour of personal prayer before I join the community for Holy Mass. During my prayer when I think of you, I do so with affection, gratitude and admiration. I thank God for the work that each Hospitaller does every day in his name and in the manner and spirit of John of God. I ask God to bless and reward each one of you in your personal, community or family lives. I pray also that, through your ministry of service so generously given, those who avail of the programs, facilities or have their lives touched in any way by a follower of John of God will come to experience the presence of God in their lives. I bring these intentions into the Community Eucharistic Celebration and offer them to God Our Heavenly Father.

My sincere apologies for my shortcomings of which there are many and I ask for forgiveness if I have inadvertently offended any one or caused anyone harm in anyway. I also ask for forgiveness if I have failed to carry out the mandate given to me at the 2006 General Chapter to the best advantage for the Order. I am sorry if any are disappointed because I have failed to guide our Order with greater clarity and precision on the road of renewal in accordance with the spirit and teaching of the
Vatican Council. I accept full responsibility for the decisions taken by the General Government and the manner in which the work of animation of the Order was conducted over the past six years.

Finally, as a Family let us together join hands in prayer; seek the intercession and guidance of Our Blessed Lady, Mother of Good Counsel, Saint John of God and so many Hospitallers who have gone before us marked with the sign of Hospitality for the success of our General Chapter.

Gratefully yours in St. John of God.

Br. Donatus Forkan, O.H.
Prior General