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Priore Generale

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SAINT JOHN OF GOD

The power of charity

To all the brothers and Co-workers, Members of the Hospitaller Family of St John of God



On the occasion of the Solemnity of St John of God on 8 March, I am writing to all the Members of the Hospitaller Family of St John of God to offer you my best wishes for a happy Feast Day, wherever the Order is present. With all the prudence needed because of the continuing pandemic, I invite you to celebrate it in simplicity, in depth and with joy in this Jubilee year celebrating the 450th anniversary of the Church's official recognition of our Institute, with Pope St. Pius V's Bull, *Licet ex debito*.

As you know, Brother Pascual Piles, who was the Superior General of the Order from 1994 to 2006, died on 28 December in Saragossa (Spain). He was a passionate devotee of St John of God, as a person, as a saint, as a Hospitaller. He said that he often spoke to him in prayer, and his spirit guided him in his life and mission. Now he is doing so face-to-face in heaven, and we ask them both to continue interceding for our Family which they so cherished, and to which they devoted their whole, especially in this year in which we are celebrating the Provincial Chapters.

I felt it would a fitting tribute to the memory of our Brother Pascual Piles to wish you all a Happy Feast of St John of God, using the message that he wrote to all the members of the Order on 8 March 1995 inaugurating the 5th Centenary of St John of God, entitled "*The Power of Charity*".¹

1. He has taught us what love is: He has given his life for us; therefore, we also must give our lives for the sake of our brothers (1 Jn 3,16).

This is the interpretation that Saint John offers of Jesus Christ. He defines him as LOVE, and proof of his love is the fact that He died for us. Saint John also speaks of the life of the Christian. Jesus gave us this witness; therefore, we also are called to act as he did and give our lives for the sake of others. This message was picked up by many people who used him as a life project and, moving from Christ to serve others, dedicated themselves heart and soul, in different ways and through material work, to a sole and unique purpose: the good of others.

¹ Piles, P. *The Power of Charity*. Montemor-o-Novo, 8 March 1995.

Also, John of God - a man from from 15th- and 16th-century Montemor - who lived rooted in Christ at the service of others, had this insight. He clearly heard this call while listening to master Avila preach in the small church of the Martyrs in Granada on 20 January 1539, the feast of Saint Sebastian. He gradually strengthened his answer under the guidance of Saint John of Avila, whom he chose as his spiritual director, and from that moment on his life became incarnated in love, charity, and the mercy of God towards men.

John of God chose to address his love to the poor, the sick and the needy to make the love of God manifest. He began to work for them without relying on outside help and support, and having to fight against a strong mistrust towards him. The authenticity of his project of love for others little by little earned him credibility and once his dedication was acknowledged he was helped not only by the city of Granada but also by Andalusia and all of Spain.

In opening the celebrations of the Fifth Centenary of his birth here in Montemor-o-Novo, we wish to proclaim that, for all he did, we consider his life as a song of love, a song of charity. We do this for the city of Montemor-o-Novo and for all the faithful of this region who are gathered here for this celebration. We also do it for all of the Order: Brothers; Co-workers: staff, volunteers and benefactors; the sick and the needy. We do it for the Church and for the world. Yes, the life of Saint John of God was a song of love. He understood the sign of Christ and, like Him, he committed himself until his death, which was not blood-stained but was caused nonetheless by having worn himself out for others.

Remembering him today is a way of rendering homage to him; and he really deserves it. However, the best way we can render homage to him is by imitating him in our lives. Each one in his place within society, with his own identity in the Church. We are called to live out love, charity, Hospitality like him.

We feel we are the Church that was founded by Jesus Christ to carry out a project of love. The same Church that Saint John of God loved and of which he always felt a loyal son. The Church which acknowledged his holiness and presented him to us as a life model. The Church which, represented by the Holy Father John Paul II, participates in the opening of the Fifth Centenary of the birth of Saint John of God and which wished to be present by sending us a Delegate, Cardinal Fiorenzo Angelini, our brother by virtue of his being and aggregate of the Order and Chairman of the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral of Healthcare Workers.

Our society needs incarnated projects, founded on love. Politicians, professionals, citizens, believers and non-believers, we are all called on to create a society where violence, marginalization, competition, manipulation are eliminated and justice, solidarity, the respect and dignity of all are promoted in a spirit of love.

The Order is called on to promote a society that provides for the real needs of people and, like Saint John of God, must set up alternative and significant social and healthcare facilities where the sick, the poor, the outcasts are treated with humanity, technical competence, and love. John of God was a man who spoke little; he was a man of life, real life. Yet he had a philosophy and theology of life of his own. He had it and shaped it, manifesting it not only through his life but also in the letters that he wrote. The message they convey to us today lies in the following expressions which we shall look at one by one.

2. Always have charity, for where there is no charity there is no God, although God is everywhere. (Letter to Luis Batista 15).

He presents love as an element which makes the presence of God possible. It is a biblical reflection which can be found in the Gospel of Matthew (cf. 25, 39-40) and in the first letter of Saint John (cf. 4,20). Theology teaches us that God is present everywhere, we also know that he is present in the Eucharist and in His Word. God is also present in every brother, in others who must be considered and treated as a brother.

Consequently, the projects that are based on dedication to others are projects which make the presence of God manifest. Needless to say, projects which are based on unscrupulous ambition, division, violence and aggression rule out the presence of God. His word, the word of Saint John of God questions us: do I collaborate to make the presence of God in life possible or, instead, am I someone who impedes such a presence? Brothers, Co-workers of the Order, citizens of Montemor-o-novo and of the world, let us make the presence of God in the world possible through love, for His project is founded on love alone. That is what Saint John of God did.

3. If we were to consider how great the mercy of God is, we would never neglect to do good when we can. (1 Letter to the Duchess of Sessa 13)

A project of love can always be enriched by the experience of the love of God, which gives us the strength and the ability to give ourselves to others. Being able to experience the love of God introduces us into an atmosphere of faith. Faith is a gift and being able to experience the love of God personally is an even greater gift.

We know that we must be open to others, be attentive of the needs of others, but sometimes our selfishness gets in the way. After his own experience of the love of God, John of God became like an accelerated engine. He could not neglect to do good. For anyone, at any time, for any reason. His life was transformed completely by the experience of the love of God.

Our last General Chapter proclaimed this year of the Centenary a JUBILEE YEAR, in the hope that it may be for all the people connected to the Order, for all the people who identify with Saint John of God, a time of true spiritual renewal. May this be a year in which we experience - like Saint John of God - the love of God for us, which will enable us to always do good when we can.

Plans envisaging the humanization of healthcare, the enhancement of the culture of Hospitality, projects able to tend to the needs of our patients and their families, the integration and coordination relating to marginalization, the distribution of healthcare on ethical grounds, etc.; all this represents the desire to "never neglect to do good when we can."

4. Like water quenches fire, thus charity erases sin. (1 letter to the Duchess of Sessa 13).

A life project based on charity and on love is tantamount to taking unlimited powers in one's life. It is St. Augustine's "love and do what you want" (Essay on the first letter of Saint John, VIII, 8). It is the atmosphere of love that Saint John of the Cross thinks will be present at the final moment: "at the end of life we will examine you in love" (Sayings of light and love 59). He who loves, and loves profoundly,

cannot live in sin. They are two clashing conditions. Love and sin cannot coexist, love and selfishness are two opposite realities, they cannot be present at the same time.

Let us thus be prepared to love as Saint John of God did. The trouble is when we are willing to do it only in part: yes, but, no ...

Adopting the attitudes of Saint John of God means diving into life without fear, with courage, hope and the illusion of taking part in a project that is worthwhile, certain that in the extent to which we are able to love we will prevent sin from entering into us, we will prevent selfishness from entering into us, we will build up brotherhood and shall transform ourselves in Hospitality.

5. Always have charity, for this is the mother of all virtues. (3 Letter to the Duchess of Sessa 16).

According to me, this is the most exhaustive expression of Saint John of God as compared the four mentioned so far: it invites us to have charity, to love always, to make sure that love is always a fundamental attitude in our life. And since love entails all other virtues as well, it is also the mother of all virtues. Where there is love, everything exists, where there is no love, nothing exists.

Thus, I wish all of you a life based on love, brotherhood, justice. Participating in the opening of the Fifth Centenary of the birth of Saint John of God and in the other celebrations is like entering into the spiritual atmosphere which he experienced. We will close the Centenary next year in Granada, in the town and on the date of his death, although we commit to always work on a project of life, as he did.

May the Centenary be for all of us a time to experience more profoundly the power of love.

As is customary at this time of year, I would like to announce to all our Hospitaller Family of St John of God the results of the 2021 campaign: "Campaign to support and sustain the St John of God Centre in Batibo. Cameroon". The total raised was 375.715,61 euro, thanks to everyone's generous solidarity, for which I would like to thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

I would like to inform you that for the current year 2022, the campaign will be aimed at **supporting our works in Cuba**. Specifically, it concerns two projects: 1) Saint John of God Health Centre in Havana: Development of the Sainte Anne Unit for elderly women in chronic condition with 21 beds; 2) Saint Raphael Reception Centre in Havana: Palliative Care Unit for people at the end of life with 15 beds. We will soon send you more concrete information on these projects. I urge you all to support this much needed project and thank you for in advance for your never-failing generosity.

May the power of St John of God's charity, and our Brother Pascual Piles' testimony to hospitality and fraternity animate all the Members of our Hospitaller Family to live our vocation to Hospitality at the service of the sick, the poor and the needy, with passion and joy.

United in Our Lord and in St John of God, I send you all my fraternal best wishes.



Brother Jesús Etayo
Superior General