

EUROPE REGIONAL CONFERENCE

Opening address

Bro. Jesús Etayo
Naples, 14 March, 2016

1. Introduction

Welcome and greetings to you all and in the -workers, to this Europe Regional Conference which, as you know already, will be the only one we shall be holding during the present Sexennium, as in all the other Regions of the Order, as scheduled.

The Order's work by regions began years ago, and subsequently became increasingly more intense, for there is no doubt that this is not a wise approach, but something we are finding increasingly more necessary, to enable us to deal more specifically with the issues in each of the places in which the Order is present. In an increasingly globalised world in which communications can reach everywhere in the world in an instant, and in which so many other cultural and social aspects are becoming standardised, we must nevertheless continue to bear each of these places, and each of the cultures and identities of each people, zone and region, firmly in mind. We intend to keep this vision and this specificity alive within our Hospitaller Family, weighing up and reflecting on the issues raised in the light of each situation, knowing that even within one and the same region or continent, and even within one and the same country, differences may also exist, of which, as far as possible, we have to take account.

Working by regions also enables us to pool our efforts in each region, which can also reach out to others. It is difficult to go forward alone, but by working together, sharing and pooling our efforts and our potential, we can help each another, and grow much more together. We are finding more and more examples of this, as we act boldly and implement joint projects in the fields of formation, mission, international cooperation and other aspects of our life. One practical example in the Europe Region is the Brussels office which I believe is working well and has certainly many future possibilities to continue growing, with the necessary support and participation of everyone concerned. As you know, the Congregation of the Sisters Hospitallers of the Sacred Heart of Jesus has also joined the Brussels Association.

There is no doubt that working by regions has to be done at all times in communion with the whole Order, in relation to the core aspects of our very being and Identity, even though they move forward at a different pace, and in their own time. Diversity and universality or communion must

be, for us, two sides of the same coin, by which I mean our Order. This is also why all our Regional Conferences will be dealing with a number of common issues facing the Order as a whole.

Since this will be the only Regional Conference we shall be holding during the Sexennium, we must bear very clearly in mind the Declarations and Lines of Action of the last General Chapter in Fatima in 2012, which must mark the course to which our Institution must keep, just over half-way through this period. I shall be referring to some of them in a moment, while others will emerge during the course of our meeting.

2. Looking to the future, hopefully and boldly

The motto that we are using for most of the events in this Sexennium is *Living hospitality hopefully and boldly*. These are two fundamental aspects of the age we are living through, and we must pray that our Lord will give us these spiritual gifts. I have mentioned them very often in the past and I do not want to repeat myself, except to remind ourselves that our hope is grounded on God, from whom our vocation comes, and to whom our work – that is to say, the project of Hospitality according to the spirit of Saint John of God – belongs. This should fill us with confidence, particularly when our lives are centred on our Lord, and are consecrated to Him by our total commitment to Him. *Only on the basis of this hope can we understand boldness, in the words of the Psalmist: The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? (Psalm 27,1)*. Boldness overcomes fear, selfishness, boredom, weariness and every kind of barrier and any obstacles which paralyse us.

Living hospitality with hope and boldness requires us to be permanently ready *to listen to the Holy Spirit*, for He is our beacon and guide along our path. This is the only way to ensure that our lives and our Institution will remain on course.

As I have been saying in the recent Provincial Chapters in different fora and meetings, and as I reflected at the last Assembly of Major Superiors of the Order in Rome in October this year, we are being asked to show courage as we embark on a process of discerning its future throughout the whole Order. We are being asked to reach out and heed the promptings of the Holy Spirit to discern what kind of Order Our Lord and the Church want, within the foreseeable future, and to set out working precisely in this direction.

It must be a comprehensive discernment process and not only a question of statistics, and has to involve everyone. All of us must conduct a discernment of the Brothers' life and identity, Vocations Promotion and Formation, community life, the apostolic mission and the role of the Brothers in that mission, our Co-workers and the Hospitaller Family of Saint John of God. And it must also take account of the structures, to see which ones are the most appropriate for our future. And the only purpose of all this is to continue remaining faithful to the charism and mission of Saint John of God's Hospitality which our Lord has given to us, and which the Church recognises as ours.

It is important to involve all our Brothers, because we need the motivation, willingness and commitment of everyone to be able **to open up a new phase in the life of the Order**, a consecrated Hospitaller life, with a new configuration, with a fresh quality and approach, with new eagerness, with boldness, wide awake to be able to awaken the world.

What it actually entails is to undergo a process of permanent discernment which we have to perform, but which is becoming increasingly more necessary today, throughout the Order, if we are to continue responding to our mission just as so many other Brothers have done throughout our history. It now falls to us to do likewise. It is also a sign of the times for the consecrated life, in which so many Institutes have already done the same, or are currently engaged on it. If we do not do it now, it may be too late when we eventually get round to it, and then be obliged to act take precipitously and take undesirable decisions.

It is a process that all the Provinces must join in. Discernment may come up with different outcomes, in different places. Europe is the place where the the Order has the widest presence, and the largest number of Brothers and Centres. But things are changing rapidly and I do not think it is possible to continue with the same number of Provinces that we have present. We have to begin looking more broadly with a more universal and Church-oriented approach, with a much less local and Provincial sense and discern more clearly the best way to be faithful to our charism and our mission. Firstly, the number of Brothers is in decline and will be declining even more, while Centres are becoming increasingly more complex and the public funding system for our centres is now beginning to go into crisis. There are more considerations that we can draw from this situation, but what is obvious is that we have the responsibility to think clearly and discern the future of the Order in Europe, taking a comprehensive approach to it: what kind of Order do we want? What lifestyle? How to take forward our mission? With what structures etc? I know that some people are very committed to their day-to-day work in and do not see this need with the urgency that is required. But we must open our eyes wide, my Brothers if we want to avoid sleeping on the mission and missing the voice of the Spirit like to foolish virgins (Mt 25, 1). After this Regional Conference all the Provinces must, I believe, set about this discernment – as some are already doing – giving top priority to making practical proposals to be put to our Provincial Chapters. And this must be done with the support and participation of every Brother and all our Co-workers. We have to study and prepare the methodology and the most appropriate strategy, and we must certainly call on experts in the field, who have already followed this same route in their own Institutions.

Would also like to express my personal thanks to the Europe Regional Commission, which was only instituted a few years ago but is really growing well and proving its capability to drive many working groups and subcommissions in virtually every area. This is a fine example to all of us showing that corporation and trying to establish synergies are highly positive to us all. I believe that they are blazing the trail towards the future in this regard.

3. Keeping alive Saint John of God's legacy: Hospitality

The sole purpose of doing what I have just said is to keep alive the legacy which our Founder and our Inspiration, Saint John of God, has bequeathed to us: faithful to the Holy Spirit and based on his own testimony of life, he created a hospitality movement which has lasted to this very day. All he needed to give his first followers was his own example of life. We might say that he did exactly the reverse of what we are being asked to do: he began from scratch, and by his example alone he attracted many people, including ourselves. We are a large, numerous family but we need to keep on maintaining “John of God’s dream of hospitality come true”, by our example and witness, as boldly and creatively as lived.

From his own experience, he knew that serving Jesus Christ in the poor made it essential to **empty himself** *leaving the flesh and everything else behind*, overcoming doubts and insecurity and *putting up with bad days and other very good days*. He knew that anybody who wished to join this type of life needed to undergo a **process of familiarity and intimacy with Jesus Christ**, to motivate him, to imitate his self-giving out of love for God and his neighbour, with no half-measures. He proposed attaining **the highest possible level of love**: *Remember Our Lord Jesus Christ and his blessed Passion, and recall how he gave back good for the evil they did him. You must do likewise, so that when you come to the house of God you can recognise both good and evil. Neither did he conceal the difficulties and demands: if you come here, you will have to be very obedient and work much harder than you have ever done... not to sit idle, for the most beloved son is entrusted with the greatest tasks and labour... all for the love of God*”. The ultimate criterion which gives sense and meaning to everything else is to aspire **to base and centre our life** on the experience which drove his love and everything he did: *love Our Lord Jesus Christ above everything in the world, for however much you love him he still loves you more; Always have charity, for where there is no charity God is not there - even though God is everywhere*”. Basically, he wanted Brothers who had experienced the mercy of God, for that would enable them to live their lives full of love, serving to the smallest detail, faithful, understanding, capable of forgiveness and reconciliation, and united among themselves. This is the way he transmitted to them his faith, and the charism he had received.¹

Maintaining the legacy of our Founder and giving it continuity means that we have to do what John of God asked of Luis Bautista and those who wished to follow him: to cultivate an intense spiritual life, that is, a life of passion for Christ, and boundless self-giving to the most fragile vulnerable people, as a consequence of an intimate life lived with God. These are the foundations on which the Order was originally built, and which have underpinned the Order ever since – and without which, the Order died out – and which all of us are being asked to endorse, to ensure that Saint John of God’s Gospel-inspired hospitality will continue to live on in the present, and into the future.

¹ The Path of Hospitality in the manner of St John of God. The Spirituality of the Order. Rome 2003. 26-27

“When, as Brothers of St John of God, we allow the thirst for spirituality which we harbour to flourish in us, we must be attentive to the surprises that the Spirit brings. Something new will be born within us. Barriers will tumble. The impossible will become possible. New wildernesses will bloom. Our thirst will be quenched. We shall be joyful and enthusiastic messengers of the Good News of Mercy and Hospitality. We shall be a parable of a new world in the midst of the world of suffering and marginalisation.”²

The hospitality we have inherited from St John of God remains today **as topically relevant as ever**, in a world where suffering, violence, terrorism, hunger and sickness are still powerfully assailing all the regions the planet. Saint John of God’s humble and simple proposal of Gospel-inspired hospitality, open to cooperation with other institutions and with all people of goodwill who pursue peace, health and fraternity between peoples, is the crux of our mission, and is a social value and a paramount ethical criterion for our own age. Like Saint John of God, we have to practise hospitality, welcoming in those who arrive at our gates and going out into the peripheries, where there are so many suffering people.

From the outset, our Founder was always assisted in his mission by Co-workers, Volunteers and Benefactors. At the present time, our mission is obviously very extensive, thanks to our Co-workers and ultimately to the **Hospitaller Family of Saint John of God** who make it possible. All the members of this Family, Brothers and Co-workers, are invited to keep alive the legacy bequeathed to us by our Founder, keeping alive his spirit and his style, as I said before. All of us must endeavour to promote and grow this Family, not only in terms of numbers but above all of their depth. We have mainly been dealing with cooperation in the mission, in our apostolic work. But it is also necessary to go further, and to foster and nurture cooperation in the spirit of Saint John of God, the spirituality of the Order, and the vocation to hospitality as members of the laity. Only thus shall we truly strengthen the bonds of cooperation, and above all the identity and sense of belonging to our Family. Here, too, we must be bold and creative.

4. The Life of the Brothers: Vocations Promotion and Formation

It is evident that the future of the Order depends on having Brothers faithful to the spirit of Saint John of God, faithful to their Hospitaller consecration. If this declines, is not nurtured or betrayed, little can really be achieved, and little can be hoped for. This demands a spiritual life of profound intimacy with Christ, passion for Him, and an apostolic life sensitive to the sick and needy, with passion for suffering humanity, testifying to hospitality independently of the role or office held, which is clearly a secondary matter. I referred to all this in the previous part of my address, and will not return to it here.

Community life is essential for us: we are Brothers, and brotherhood is one of the most important signs that we are called to display, overcoming certain temptations, such as individualism, egotism or isolationism. We must reappraise the value of community life and nurture it, and the Superiors must ensure that there is a sufficient number of members. The Church has just published the document entitled “*Identity and Mission of the Religious Brother in the Church*” (CIVCSVA) which

² Idem, 138

places great store by on fraternity as the key to our identity. We have just closed **Hospitaller Vocation Year**. It is been a very special year for all the members of our Family who have lived through it with great intensity. A huge effort was put into producing the materials for it, and many different activities and events were held with the sole purpose of sowing Hospitality, deepening our vocation and becoming aware of the need to live it exactly and faithfully. I know it is difficult to take stock of the results, but quite apart from any other consideration, I believe that we have amply achieved the objectives we set ourselves, and there is no doubt that today we are more conscious of the need to work on Vocations Promotion as a priority in the life of the Order. It has been a year dedicated to celebrating and promoting the Hospitaller vocation, but this must not stop here. Each year must be a Vocation Year, and we must continue fostering it, and continue sowing the Hospitality of Saint John of God.

We are all actively involved in Vocations Promotion, young and old, each one in our own situation. This year we also have the testimony of our Brothers and Co-workers who lost their lives in the Ebola epidemic and all those who stayed behind there, and continue to work there as true prophets and Samaritans of Hospitality, whom I wish to remember now in a simple but well deserved tribute to them. This is the only way to enable people to see in us a project, an attractive vocation worthy to be followed, just as ourselves felt when we heard the call.

Vocations Promotion is the first stage in initial formation, and its mortar. Constantly praying to the Lord of the harvest for vocations, and witnessing as individuals and communities to a happy, coherent consecrated life and self-giving are the two basic pillars underpinning Vocations Promotion. Moreover, we must continue deploying every effort to ensure that every Province and every Community has an appropriate Vocations Promotion plan, and the means and resources needed for it. The plan must be creative, outreaching, and welcoming on the part of each Brother and each Community, even though it may entail making changes to our customs and working hours. A plan which targets the culture and world of young people today, not passing hasty judgements on them, and using contemporary language that they can understand, giving them the time they need and always ensuring that accompaniment and discernment are never lacking; a plan which not only consist of the usual activities which normally tend to be rather ineffective and entail wasting a great deal of effort; a plan which needs to be overseen by a Brother trained for the purpose and with a team of Brothers and Co-workers working in coordination to sow and accompany whatever vocations our Lord sends us; a team which, among other things, has to constantly ask itself, 'what life project are we offering to young people, and to our candidates?'

It seems to be a time of scarce vocations. We must not approach it with a sense of dread and dispiritedness, but on the contrary with hope and boldness. God knows what we need and He will continue giving it, if we are truly faithful to His Spirit, and to the legacy of Hospitality of Saint John of God.

Initial Formation is essential. I have said this so many times already: it is our basis, and our future. Superiors must provide all the resources needed and must provide well-trained formators for the task. If we have well-trained Brothers we will have a future, otherwise it will be much more

difficult. I know that the Provincials are worried about the Houses and the Centres, and that is just as it should be. But it is even more important still to provide the resources, the means and the Brothers to provide the Formation which our candidates need, in a serious and appropriate manner. For the Centres, we have the invaluable assistance of our Co-workers who also assist in providing Formation, but we, as Brothers, have to take on our responsibility in this regard. It must be a real priority for us. I know that the Europe Region is engaged on a process of reflection on the possibility of working on a joint project in this regard, which I appreciate, and for which I am very grateful, for this is the right approach, despite the difficulties.

Continuing Formation is also a basic theme for the life of the Brothers and for our future. I would just like to remind you of this, and insist on it, because I believe that this is a weak point we shall never completely resolve with all our combined efforts, at least in many places and above all at the community and personal levels. I would like to emphasise Continuing Formation above all, to keep our consecration and our spiritual, fraternal and apostolic lives up-to-date. It is the “fuel” we need to complete our journey. It is not a matter of doing great things, but only what is necessary to enable our Lord to continue making “our hearts burn within us” like the hearts of the disciples on the road to Emmaus (cf. *Lk 24,32*). This is where each Brother and each Superior must do everything possible.

5. Improving charismatic management

Our mission is very wide-ranging and becomes visible through the almost 400 centres and facilities which the Order has throughout the world. Generally speaking, they are very well run, and recognised for the great social and Gospel-inspired service they perform. Yet we must realise that whether we have many or few centres, large or small, they do not, in themselves, constitute the core of our mission, because this very often depends on the possibilities and the resources available to us. What is central to our mission is the Gospel-inspired hospitality in the spirit of Saint John of God, and this is what we have to evaluate and enhance. We might say that Centres which practise hospitality and transmit and bear witness to the charism, possess a charismatic quality.

At the present time, and in view of the complexity of the world and of the centres and services we have, it is becoming increasingly more complicated to maintain many of them, because of the costs incurred and because of their charismatic quality. Indeed, we are already suffering from some signs of these difficulties and the consequent loss of some of our centres. This is why, consistently with the declarations and guidelines issued by the last General Chapter, we have to redouble our efforts to ensure adequate charismatic management in our centres, according to the criteria laid down in the Charter of Hospitality and the other documents of the Order. I believe in organising management properly and in transparency, and we must continue in the quest to achieve economic and charismatic sustainability.

The Church is also urging us to do this in order to guarantee transparent and efficient management, and we shall therefore be stressing certain particular issues in this regard over the coming days. The ***Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life***

has appealed to us to ensure professional and transparent management and, among other things, has asked us to ensure that all our accounts are properly audited, and that we carefully monitor all the centres which are running up a deficit; it insists on the need for oversight and audits, investment plans and control over investments. On the subject of financial statements, it recalls the need to draw them up using standard international formats, and keeping the accounts of the centres separate from those of the communities; **and the need for centres to have certified audited balance sheets**. It concludes by saying that “without certified financial statements, CIVCSVA can never grant authorisation to contract loans.”³

The document also emphasises the need to ensure the appropriate management of the Order’s stable patrimony, which cannot be placed in jeopardy, and requests every Institute to carefully evaluate all their centres and facilities and then adopt the most relevant dispositions bearing in mind the provisions of civil law, and to draw up an inventory of the assets belong to the stable patrimony. A number of obligations are imposed in this regard⁴ and I trust that in the next few days we shall be able to deal more specifically with this point in greater detail. I know that the Europe Region is working on the possibility of implementing some joint projects in this regard which I appreciate and for which I thank them, because this is the right approach whatever the difficulties.

There are many other aspects regarding charismatic management on which we have to work very thoroughly, including the pastoral care of the sick and the social pastoral ministry, bioethics, voluntary service and the formation of our Co-workers (School of Hospitality). I believe that the Regional Commission is animating these issues in general terms, but all of us must very carefully bear them in mind at all times.

International Cooperation is another important aspect of the Order’s life and it was emphasised by the LXVIII General Chapter. I would like once again to thank the whole Hospitaller Family of Saint John of God for their generosity and help, and for the response to the campaign to combat the Ebola epidemic since July last year, and indeed to every appeal we launch. But despite the progress that has been made in the field of cooperation, it is still necessary to more closely coordinate our centres, Provinces and the Missions and International Cooperation Office at the General Curia. Freelancing is not good nor desirable, because in this way opportunities will be missed, and above all because questions of transparency would sometimes be raised. This is why I ask all of you to coordinate with the Provinces and the Missions and International Cooperation Office, and keep update them all the time. It would also be desirable for all the European Provinces, through their own entities (foundations or *ad hoc* associations) or the Provincial Curias themselves, to attend the meetings of the St John of God Alliance where they can share in, and the project, needs and resources, and distribute them according to needs and in a coordinated manner.

³ CIVCSVA. Circular Letter - Guidelines for the management of the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (2 August 2014)

⁴ Idem

6. Conclusion: in the Year of Mercy

I wish to end by referring to this Year of Mercy, and by inviting everyone to celebrate it. As Pope Francis tells us:⁵

The practice of *pilgrimage* has a special place in the Holy Year, because it represents the journey each of us makes in this life. Life itself is a pilgrimage, and the human being is a *viator*, a pilgrim travelling along the road, making his way to the desired destination. Similarly, to reach the Holy Door in Rome or in any other place in the world, everyone, each according to his or her ability, will have to make a pilgrimage. This will be a sign that mercy is also a goal to reach and requires dedication and sacrifice. May pilgrimage be an impetus to conversion: by crossing the threshold of the Holy Door, we will find the strength to embrace God's mercy and dedicate ourselves *to being merciful with others as the Father has been with us*. (n. 14). Mercy is the very foundation of the Church's life... The Church's very credibility is seen in how she shows merciful and compassionate love. (10) During this Jubilee, the Church will be called even more to heal these wounds, to assuage them with the oil of consolation, to bind them with mercy and cure them with solidarity and vigilant care (n. 15).

It is an opportunity for us to grow in the Hospitality of St John of God, which is a special reflection of God's mercy to which all of us, as members of the St John of God Hospitaller Family, are being called to live out with all other human beings, and especially with the most vulnerable.

This is a great challenge with which every Brother, every Community, every Co-worker, and in general the whole of our Institution, are being confronted to keep alive the spirit of Mercy and Hospitality which the Spirit breathed into Saint John of God, and is continuing to breathe into us.

With this spirit, let us face the future, and do so with the hope and boldness of those who fear nothing because our Lord is accompanying our steps and is *our light and our salvation*.

I wish you a very successful meeting and pray that our Lord, our Blessed Lady, as our Patron and Queen of Hospitality, Saint John of God our Founder, and our Saints and Beati will accompany us and at all times bless all the members of our Hospitaller Family.

⁵ Pope Francis. Bull. *Misericordiae Vultus* (The Face of Mercy). Rome, 11 April 2015