

The Founder of the Hospitaller Order John Ciudad, (1495-1550) given the name of *John of God* (in 1690 he was canonized a saint of the Catholic Church), by the citizenry of Granada because of the extraordinary work that he did for the marginalized, mostly mentally ill persons and the poor of Granada, was to say the least an extraordinary person. This is significant because at the age of 42 he had what was perceived at the time an acute mental breakdown. He was ‘incarcerated’ in the area of the Royal Hospital reserved for the mentally ill and received the treatment of the day which was to be segregated, chained, flogged and starved. Before leaving the hospital, however, John vowed to begin a work that would give dignity, humanity and care to the mentally ill, in addition to other marginalized groups and needy people of the city.

When John began to put into effect his dream because of the stigma attached to mental illness John was alone, misunderstood and marginalized, something that unfortunately exists even in our day 500 years later. His hospitality was a response to those who were unable to find it elsewhere (the abandoned) and catered for those with new needs to which the others were not yet sensitized (suffering because of guilt, hatred or vendetta). John of God saw every kind of suffering both in the body and in the spirit as a challenge to be met with professionalism, kindness and hospitality. An indication of the stature of the man and his approach to his ministry is that by the time of his death, only twelve after beginning his work, he had succeeded in not only winning over the confidence and respect of the citizenry of Granada and beyond, but involving them in his project. They were so identified with John’s work that a large hospital that was at the planning stage when John died was completed with local support and is still in use today.

Every since then because of the personal biographical experience of its Founder, Saint John of God, the Hospitaller Order has always cherished and cared for persons suffering from a mental illness. Down the centuries and across the world, today the Order has a presence in 53 countries and more than 300 hospitals, services and centers that respond to a whole variety of needs, not just in the area of mental health and psychiatry but other areas of needs as well. The Family of Saint John of God, as we refer to the Order today, is made up of more than 45,000 members, Brothers and Co-workers and supported by tens of thousands of benefactors and friends who identify with and support the work of the Order for sick and needy people across the world. In the area of mental health and psychiatry we have built up a great deal of experience and skills and we have often been in the vanguard heralding in new ideas and solutions which are now being used by the public health authorities in many countries that would include Ireland, Spain, Portugal, France and Germany, and we have just opened a new mental health facility in Croatia. Through its missionary outreach the Order has setup models of care and treatment in the area of mental health and psychiatry in South Korea, Malawi, Senegal and across Latin America.

Rome, Thursday, June 10, 2010
Br. Donatus Forkan, O.H.
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