



Medicus Mundi Switzerland

Netzwerk Gesundheit für alle
Réseau Santé pour tous
Network Health for All

MMS Bulletin #118

Religion and health - spirituality and healing

Fatebenefratelli - Hospitaller Order of St. John of God **“...what we do is the Church in action”**

By Martin Leschhorn Strebel

Fatebenefratelli - Hospitaller Order of St. John of God is present in 53 countries. It provides different services together with the Health and Welfare Ministries and other civil organisations as well as local authorities. The Superior General of the Order, Brother Donatus Forkan, talks about the way they are working.*



MMS Bulletin: In October you stayed in Malawi to inaugurate the new Malawi College of Health Sciences dedicated to St John of God. Let us take this institution as example to explain, what is the aim of the Hospitaller Order of St John of God?

Brother Donatus Forkan: In a word to promote health, human dignity and wholeness of life of the human person. This objective immediately leads us as, drives us to the side of the poor and the most neglected members of society. Obviously, this is a huge task because of the numbers of people needing such help and secondly because of the variety and extent of their needs. It is immediately evident that we need to, and indeed willingly network, having twinning relationships and cooperate with other agencies that share our philosophy and values. Because we are an international body we have an area of expertise that is vast, accrued down the centuries experience in many fields of care and treatment that go back almost 500 years – all of this not only enables us to cooperate with a great variety of agencies – governmental, no-governmental, NGOs, private individuals etc. across a huge spectrum of human need but we bring with us insights, a rich spirituality and valuable methods of treatment etc.

In how many countries are you present? Are there any specific focal points in developing countries?

Well, we are present in 53 countries on all four continents, 30 of them are in the so called developing countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America. Our mission is always geared towards or focused on people of greatest need in society and of course this varies. Because of this we have the most sophisticated hospitals in terms of treatment methods, technology, or research. And close by we may have a centre that distributes meals or we have a place to stay for poor and homeless people, together with counselling services, appropriate information, guidance and help to immigrants and so on. In Africa for example we have food security programs, educational opportunities for children who have been

rescued from the streets, preventative medicine, 'bush clinics or bush patrols' in places like Papua New Guinea, where medical assistance, education on AIDS prevention, food nutrition, inoculations etc are brought to the villages on foot by a team that includes a Brother Nurse who is qualified in community health medicine.

Cooperation with Universities

In addition to this type of services we endeavour to provide models of care and treatment that governments and others can emulate. We have for example successfully accomplished this in places like Korea, in the area of mental health and psychiatry; hospice type care, care of the elderly and education and formation of children and young adults with an intellectual disability. In Malawi a community based mental health service and psychiatry, a similar model in Senegal. In North East China, the Province of Jilin, we have introduced Hospice Care for people who are terminally ill and presently are in the advanced stages in the planning of a unit to care for and treat people suffering from Alzheimer's disease at the request of the local government authority. In Columbia the Order gave a positive response to an invitation from the Government of Columbia to assist in the renewal and updating of the Health Care Services of the Capital City of Bogotá. In order to enable it to do this the Order had to acquire two Hospitals that the City Authorities had identified. The Order then in cooperation with a University and Insurances Company formed a Company, which enabled it to carry out an extensive re-form and restructuring program that has been widely acclaimed and appreciated by the Government Authorities, but more especially by the service users at the hospitals and their families.

Wherever we have a presence, especially in the developing countries, education in areas of neglect e.g. that of mental health and psychiatry, counselling, social worker, psychology, these colleges, where possible, are attached to or accredited with a local university. Obviously, mentoring, education, training of health care workers and people working with those who have a learning or physical disability form part of our mission. Naturally, we also have programs that give instruction in the area of preventive medicine, food preparation, hygiene, food, or security programs.

On your website I have read that it is more and more difficult to find brothers to work in your hospitals and health centres. Is it easier for you to engage brothers in developing countries or is it a global phenomenon? How are you tackling this problem?

A decrease in the numbers of people joining religious life and the ministerial priesthood is a worldwide phenomenon. If one sees this as a 'problem' or not, it would depend on how one sees the church. The church is made up of the People of God that has among its members those dedicated to the sacramental ministry i.e. ordained priests, those who witness to the radical following of Christ in the religious life. So the question that follows might be how many priests do we need? How many religious do we need? I don't know, I don't have the answer to that question, needless to say! Some would say that perhaps we have the correct number right now; we have the precise number that God wills to continue his redemptive mission in the world of today.

New approaches

I believe that we do need ordained ministers i.e. priests; and we do need women and men whose life is consecrated to God by Vows. These Brothers and Sisters keep alive and before all of God's People the profoundest and most enduring truth of the faith of the Christian Calling that we are all called and consecrated in Baptism to the following of Christ who is the Alfa and Omega, the beginning and the end, the reason d'être of the life of the followers of Jesus. And in this way "Consecrated persons continue the great work of evangelisation and witness on all the continents" Pope Benedict XVI, "even on the front lines of the faith, with generosity and often with the sacrifice of their lives, even to the point of

martyrdom...they are close to young people, their families, the poor, the elderly, the sick and lonely people. There is no human or ecclesial context where they are not present, frequently silent but always effective and creative, a continuation as it were of the presence of Jesus who went about doing good works to all.(Sep. 27, 05)

But I also believe that the renewal that the Second Vatican Council promotes a model of Church as community. As members of the Christian all vocations are valued and promoted. The lay Christian who forms part of or belongs to the People of God must be involved in work of evangelisation. Pope Benedict XVI states that the laity is co-responsible with the pastors for evangelisation. (While the Parish of Saint John of the Cross March 7th. 2010) While visiting the Parish of Saint John of the Cross this year, the Holy Father told parishioners there is a need to change mentalities, so as to see laypeople as co-responsible for the Church, not merely as collaborators of the clergy (Rome, March 7, 2010)

Our Order with its renewal programs and processes have promoted the idea that our lay co-workers not only share in the work or the mission of the Order, but have also received the Gift of Hospitality in the same way as the Brothers have. We now speak of ourselves as a Family, the Family of Saint John of God who are united in the mission of the Order. Not only is this a very liberating approach, if you like, but it provides unlimited opportunities to continue the work of Saint John of God to the benefit of millions of suffering and needy people across the globe. Annually more than twenty million peoples lives are touched in some by a follower of John of God. As this way of understanding ourselves bring wonderful opportunities for advancing the mission of the Order, it also brings huge challenges not least of which is the proper selection of potential co-workers, their induction and ongoing formation, education and accompaniment.

How are your health institutions integrated in the national health systems? What are the specific problems?

Where ever we are in the world we endeavour to work with central or and local health authorities, provided of course that government policy is not contrary to our philosophy and values. In many situations we work very closely together, I gave the example above of Columbia, but also in Korea we work in partnership with the City Authorities on the provision of services and programs for the elderly and people with disability. There are many other examples I could give, Ghana for example where the Government provides the salaries for those who work in our Hospitals. Naturally, we also work with insurance companies as many of the people who come to our centres or avail of our services in nearly all countries of the industrialised north are covered by insurance. Annually an external audit is conducted and annual reviews are undertaken to ensure quality service, compliance with our mission and values, standards of good practice, transparency and accountability.

In the documents of the Hospitaller Order of St John of God you stress the importance of giving help to all the human beings looking for treatment. Another important aspect your work is the evangelisation. I suppose that in the daily work of your brothers it needs a sensitive approach to find a balance between those two pillars of your work. How do you see this aspect?

It is not either or, neither is it serving the sick and poor and then we do evangelisation. For us practicing or exercising John-of-God-Hospitality in whatever way we do is evangelisation. It is two sides of the same coin, if you will, service of the sick and poor and religious consecration.

We are not in the business of operating or running hospitals etc as such, we are not for profit. Every centre and every service that we provide is a work of the Church and as such what we do is the Church in action continuing the Healing Ministry of Jesus. Works of charity therefore, are in the words of Pope Benedict XVI in his Encyclical Deus Caritas Est, (22) are essential to the Church and the Holy Father places them on the same level of importance as celebrating the

sacraments or proclaiming the Word. The church cannot neglect the service of charity any more than she can neglect the service of the Sacraments and the Word.” (Deus Caritas Est no 22) By doing this we show that the compassionate and merciful Christ of the Gospel is still alive among his people and we work with him for their salvation....We feel that we are brothers of all humankind and we dedicate ourselves chiefly to the service of the weak and the sick: their needs and sufferings touch our hearts, and lead us to alleviate those needs and sufferings and to work for the personal development and advancement of such people. (Con, 5) What underpins our mission is JOHN-OF-GOD-HOSPITALITY from which emanates or comes other values e.g. respect, quality, responsibility and spirituality.

Religion and health are as expressions linked to clearly defined, scientific based (theology and health science) systems of thinking and acting. Spirituality and healing are referring to another system, which is much more difficult to define. How would you bring these expressions in a relation to each other?

The human being is one, born with an innate dignity, which nothing can destroy or diminish. The human being is spiritual, but you might say very human in the sense we usual used the word – meaning weak, sinful, prone to the negative aspect of life, is vulnerable, exposed to illness and the ageing process and who needs to be understood, forgiven, loved, appreciated, treated with respect and compassion as he/she traverses the road of life. There is no lasting city here but we journey to one that is to come. (Hebrews XIII. 4) We are a pilgrim people; on a journey, fraught with dangers and obstacles to ones advancement, but the traveller has a powerful companion in Jesus, who you might say, has already cleared the way for him or her – through His Death and Resurrection. Even so, the traveller feels his/her limitations and fatigue as is part of the human condition. This insight inspired John of God to repeatedly state that the human being far exceeds the value of the combined treasures of the world. Inspired by the example of our Founder, John of God and with appreciation of the dignity of the human person – a son or daughter of God, only the best is good enough in terms of the service we endeavour to provide for the individual who comes to us in a time vulnerability or need and to do so in an environment of hospitality.

In line with this way of thinking and in keeping with the Magisterium of the Church, the Order respects and supports scientific research when its purpose is genuinely humanistic and avoids any form of exploitation or destruction of the human person; when it is independent of any interests pursuing other goals; and particularly when it is directed at working for the true welfare of the human person. To that end not only the objectives but also the methods and means used by research should always respect the dignity of every human being at every stage of his development and at every step in the process of experimenting. Research should offer its contribution and its competence and skills in those sectors where help is most urgently needed to solve problems involving the life and the health of human beings.

** Brother Donatus Forkan was born April 5th 1942 in Swinford, County Mayo, Ireland. Brother Donatus is a qualified nurse and is a graduate of the Order's International College in Rome. He also completed studies at The Franciscan College, Seoul, Republic of Korea and The Holy Ghost Missionary College, Kimmage Manor, Dublin, Ireland.*

Brother Donatus was elected Provincial of the Province of the Immaculate Conception, Ireland in 1992 and in 1994 was elected General Councillor. He was re-elected General Councillor on the 18th of November 2000 and served as the First General Councillor for the last six years. Among his responsibilities as General Councillor, Brother Donatus was co-ordination of the Missions of The Order.



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