

Creative Fidelity: Renewal in the Spirit of St. John of God

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Spirituality is a way of living: life as relationship with God, neighbor, and self. The beliefs, practices, and moral norms of many various spiritualities guide people's interior life. The demands of daily living and the challenges of our time call upon people's various spiritualities for a response. As Brothers of St. John of God, we respond to the needs of the sick, abandoned, poor, and dying. This response demands an interior disposition of patience, kindness, understanding, fortitude, and physical energy. Often our responses are made in the midst of adversity from limited material and financial resources.

A recent book says, "Spirituality is understood to include not merely the techniques of prayer but, more broadly, a conscious relationship with God, in Jesus Christ, through the indwelling of the Spirit." St. John of God never lost faith, hope, and love. In the midst of great suffering, he always responded to those in need. Since such responses are not easy, every generation of Hospitaller Brothers of St. John of God is confronted with a spiritual attitude called hardness of heart. It begins with feelings of staleness or stagnation. The soul feels lifeless. The spirit becomes deadened.

To move away from apathy and feel our actions reanimated, what we need is an interior disposition of wonder and awe, a renewal process that leads to a rebirth. This movement can be called "creative fidelity," a continuing response under the impulse of the Holy Spirit to the challenges of present moments as they come along. Fidelity of this kind is based on a certain relationship that is felt to be inalterable, an assurance of something that cannot be fleeting. When we say "creative fidelity" in the context of the spirituality of the Brothers of St. John of God, there arises a specific image: because of his interior life, St. John of God, who lived more than four hundred years ago, was able to be endlessly resourceful.

St. John of God had many sides to his personality. Leaving home at an early age, he soon joined the army and soon ran into many difficulties. Going to Africa in search of more meaningful experience, he labored for people who were in dire need. He struggled with his own sinfulness and encountered mental illness. Yet he went forward for the sake of the sick and forsaken and experienced his conversion in serving thousands of the sick in Granada. In short, John's life was not an easy one. But it is in this simple yet profound life that we discover the elements of the "creative fidelity" to which his disciples, sharers of his spirituality, are called.

St. John of God showed by example how to live in creative fidelity to the Spirit of God. The root of his creative fidelity is summed up in his constant proclamation "I trust solely in Jesus Christ."² This trust in God was basic to his interior disposition. It is what enabled him to take on the inevitable difficulties of living in a world of pain and suffering.

Hospitality as a spirituality is a way of being and acting in the midst of suffering. It is a love that leads to caring for and a caring that leads to love of, those who suffer. St. John of God could see the image of God in the suffering of those he called his brothers and sisters. Such an ability is a form of authentic human development. In his lifetime John of God motivated people to act hospitably in the midst of difficulties, and today he does so too. He remarks in a letter to a friend, "Remember our Lord Jesus Christ and how he returned good for the evil they did to him."³

Connected with the notion of creative fidelity are the signs of the times and the challenges arising from them. Creative fidelity, in the spirituality of St. John of God, is the working out of the implications of our beliefs, adapting to the reality we live in, so Review for Religious that our human spirit can "act justly, love tenderly, and walk humbly with our God" (Mi 6:8-9).

John of God is not simply a poetic figure who stands outside the mainstream of his time. He felt the pain and abandonment of the sick and suffering and was enormously sensitive to what the public agencies of the time were not doing for others. His message, "Do good to yourself by doing good for others,"⁴ was an amazing message calling for contemplation, conversion, and compassion and for commitment to alleviating people's suffering. It is this process, a cycle of renewal, which I call creative fidelity to the spirit of St. John of God.

Responding to the needs of our times requires a soulful response, requires that we Brothers be contemplative. Contemplative prayer involves seeing and being aware of the truth in a universal manner. It means being aware of our surroundings. It is about movement and action or the lack thereof. For St. John of God, this awareness meant "Always have charity, for where there is no charity God is not there-- even though God is everywhere."

The Brother of St. John of God who takes a contemplative stance toward life, especially the life of suffering, will experience a great depth of happiness, peace, and love. He will also be able to sense their absence. There is an interior joy in seeing and understanding the meaning and reason of human suffering. Seeing the truth of suffering calls us to conversion. To act on what we see requires conversion. Contemplation allows us to see injustice, to confront our own needs, and to be open to a newness of heart. Hospitality to a stranger means welcoming someone unfamiliar. It means recognizing another's vulnerability compassionately. The interior elements of this response open us up to our helplessness. John says in a letter: "I am very unhappy when I see so many poor people (who are my brothers and neighbors) suffering and in great need in both body and soul and I cannot help them. Nevertheless, I trust solely in Jesus Christ, who will bring me out of debt, for he knows my heart."⁶ The interior awareness of our helplessness is the beginning of creative fidelity.

An authentic spiritual response includes a fidelity to Christ and the gospel, a fidelity to our fellow human beings and to our times, a fidelity to the charism of St. John of God, and a fidelity to the church and its mission in the world.

The spiritual life of a Brother of St. John of God challenges us to present new answers to the new problems of today's world, not so very different from the times of St. John of God, when racism, greed, hatred, fanaticism, and economic inequities—and much indifference to such things, too—caused many human ills. People marginalized people, keeping them out of and alienated from the dominant social order or making them so.

We too are faced with the isolation of the sick, the derelict, the aged, and the dying. Today we too place people in categories that dehumanize, that make human relations less than ideal. Through his spirituality St. John of God recognized the vulnerability of others and recognized his own. Hospitality, for St. John of God, is a spiritual movement toward unity with God and neighbor. He goes beyond empathy to actually taking on the sufferings of the other. In his own experience of alienation, of being locked up in a mental hospital, St. John of God had an experience of "I am at home" and was liberated to be a brother to the poor and abandoned. Conversion leads to compassion.

For the Brother of St. John of God, hospitality is the apostolic expression of love. Hospitality exposes the giver to the formative experience of vulnerability. St. John of God was challenged by the needs of his time. He looked into himself and recognized the need to change. He looked outside of himself and saw the needs of suffering humanity. He surrendered to God and discovered a deeper relational integrity among the different dimensions of his life. He discovered that within the self there is little or no way of restoring people to their fullness. He turned in his need to total reliance on God. As we trace his spiritual journey, we see that this experience of trust in God allowed him, and allows future generations of his followers, to be formed in the image of the compassionate and merciful Christ, who emptied himself of his divinity and went about doing good, healing every kind of infirmity.

Hastened by the words of the sermon of St. John of Avila which brought about his conversion, St. John of God discovered the merciful love of God the Father and experienced God's compassion as a remedy for his own sense of alienation. He experienced the compassion and merciful love of the Father as God's fidelity to him. New circumstances demand new responses, which Review for Religious in turn demand ongoing renewal and openness to conversion, which allows our response to be one of compassion.

Hospitality, thus, means becoming one with the stranger, as the Son of God became a human being, emptying himself of his divinity to free us in mercy and compassion to respond to the Father's love. Fidelity to the charism of hospitality is lived as a spirituality when, in the presence of suffering people, we are emptied of our own pride, memories,

or hostilities to be present to others not as the remedy or the source of healing, but quite simply as a compassionate companion committed to the liberating power of the Spirit, an encounter of solidarity and communion.

The spiritualized Brother of St. John of God is one who knows that God is communicating with him. But this deifying force does not remain closed in on itself; it radiates out of him to others--which means a true and real "horizontal diffusion" of the Spirit.⁷ In this manner a Brother of St. John of God participates in the self-emptying act of the Son of God. "They don't just participate in him but they also communicate him to others.

.. They don't just live, but they give life to others, and all of this is not something that pertains to a simple creative force." ⁸

At first glance it appears that John of God never asked any questions about what he should do; he just responded to the need at hand. Questions about whom to help and how to help them seem neither to have been noticeable in John's way of acting nor relevant to his cast of mind. He saw a needy person and acted. His fundamental healing project was to revitalize people's sense of integrity by restoring their human dignity. Yet, in his unwavering commitment to those in need, he did listen to his spiritual director, who warned him: "Do not deceive yourself by saying, 'I want to help them.' Because dangers lurk beneath good intentions when there is a lack of prudence, and God does not want me to bring about good for others at the expense of damage to my own soul."⁹ Similarly, our own commitment needs to be tested against our fidelity to St. John of God's charism and to the church.

The exterior structures of the church of today are in a state of permanent change. However, the Brother of St. John of God who, having experienced faith as a gift from a loving Father, does not rely just on exterior norms. Instead he looks to create an ever growing experience of a community of hope. The spirituality of St. John of God--and that of his Brothers as well--is an "in the church spirituality. "In the church "refers to the church as it defines itself here and now and as it grows from the present into the future. For a Brother of St. John of God, fidelity to this growth is one of searching in the context of suffering for ways that we and others can grow in our human spirit. As Pope John Paul II says in *Evangelium vitae*, "We are called to express wonder and gratitude for the gift of life and to welcome, savor, and share the gospel of life..." (§84).

Our commitment is to human life. It is in living this life that we discover the interior life of the soul. Creative fidelity allows us to make a commitment to the spirituality of St. John of God in such a way that we see this truth that *Evangelium vitae* expresses: "Human life is sacred because from its beginning it involves 'the creative action of God,' and it remains forever in a special relationship with the Creator, who is its sole end. God alone

is the Lord of life from its beginning until its end; no one can claim for himself the right to destroy directly an innocent human being" (§53).

The service of the Brother of St. John of God to the sick, the suffering, and the abandoned is a spiritual act of dedicated devotion to the person of Christ. Those who wish to be true followers of St. John of God will grasp his spirit and nurture it. Like him they will find great consolation in the contemplation of the Passion. Such contemplation is much more than the sentimentally pious 16th-century practice that some might consider it to be. "When you are troubled or distressed, turn to the Passion of Jesus Christ our Lord and to his precious wounds, and you will feel great consolation," he wrote,¹⁰ This practice sustained him in his vision of love and assistance for those in need.

We have seen how spiritual growth can occur within a spirituality of hospitality. God calls us personally, and our response-- we are calling it "creative fidelity"--is our effort to understand more broadly and deeply the purpose and meaning of St. John of God's spirituality as embodied by our Brothers today. We are looking at a theological pattern that emerges in his spirituality and can help us in our ongoing renewal: contemplation, conversion, compassion, and commitment.

In our experience of living out the spirituality of St. John of God, we are able to note how bringing the word of God to bear upon a situation raises questions, suggests new insights, and opens new interior responses. In this manner we continue to learn how to be faithful to suffering humanity in its needs in these our times, Review for Religious faithful to Christ and the gospel, faithful to the church and its mission in the world, and faithful to the charism of hospitality as lived out by St. John of God.

Creative fidelity is not stability of mind and heart. It moves us away from a "static" human existence. In the face of suffering humanity, this means a caring and compassionate response. It moves us away from repetitive gestures of piety and from dull and wooden ways of thinking about the human experience of suffering. The human experience is too rich and complex to be thought of in terms that are static and finished. Thus the cycle of contemplation, conversion, compassion, and commitment allows us the freedom to participate as co-creators in a changing world. Creative fidelity requires a commitment to those values which allow us to transcend our present limitations. It allows us to become whole and integrated as individuals and steers us away from selfish concerns.

If we are moving, then we are alive. The Brother of St. John of God, like his founder, spends himself for this world and for other human beings, and he is enriched by both. The spiritual life is a movement towards simplicity and union. Holiness for a Brother of St. John of God is a gradually deeper appreciation of this union and solidarity with those who suffer. Giving and receiving life is the dynamic spirituality of St. John of God, to which we respond in creative fidelity, keeping it alive with the impulse of the Holy Spirit.

Consequently, a St. John of God rule of discernment focuses on self-forgetfulness. John of God created a climate of wholeness by being devoid of any pretense or feelings of superiority. In this manner his was a healing and restorative presence, welcoming the Christ in the other, that other who was more than himself.

Identity and intimacy are the result of an awakened heart. Knowing yourself and loving God and neighbor are the direct result of being open to the Spirit. Creative fidelity as a process of renewal prepares and helps us to cast off the bonds that hinder us from becoming more loving ministers of hospitality.

We can understand St. John of God's spirituality best by looking at and reflecting on his life. Often as Brothers we lament the lack of written guidelines derived from details of his personal journey of holiness as he came closer to his neighbor, to himself, and to God. We do manage to see, though, that his relations with God and neighbor gave him meaning and direction, especially during times of struggle and distress. The spirituality of hospitality helps us as caregivers to have serenity in times of difficulty, to offer a gentle environment for relationships to grow and to bring healing. Hospitality, the charism and spirituality of the Brothers, is a contemplative stance in an anxious world, a gift that gladdens the spirit and restores hope, a vital component that heals life. The healing potential of the spirituality of St. John of God is that the sufferings of those whom we serve be transformed into love, joy, and peace.

Notes

- ~ Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History: Questions of Interpretation and Method* (London: SPCK, 1991), p. 32.
- 2 Letter to Gutierrez Lasso II, para. 8.
- 3 Letter to Luis Bautista, para. 10.
- 4 Francisco de Castro, *The First Biography of St. John of God*, chap. 12.
- 5 Letter to Luis Bautista, para. 15.
- 6 Letter II to Gutierrez Lasso, para. 8.
- 7 Yannis Spiteris, "The Holy Spirit: Principal Agent of the New Evangelization," chap. 9 of *Preparing for the Year 2000 (Urbi et Orbi Communication)*, p. 197.
- 8 G. Palmas, "Della divina e divinizzante partecipazione," *Scritti*, II, p. 151
- 9 Second Letter of St. John of Avila to St. John of God.
- 10 Letter I to the Duchess of Sessa, para. 10.