



120th Anniversary of St John of God Hospital Subiaco

HOMILY

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St John of God Hospital, Subiaco
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When I was a young Salesian in my early years of formation, I remember reading a spiritual book which was very widely read in those long ago days. I am sure that many of the Sisters here will be aware of it and perhaps many others of you as well.

The book, by Henri Nouwen, carried the title, *The Wounded Healer*. It was a book about the priesthood and focused on the important truth that priests, called to be instruments of the healing power of Christ, especially though not only through the sacraments, were themselves as much wounded as those they were sent to serve.

The book did not only explore this reality on a superficial level. With great insight it also developed the idea that it was precisely because they were wounded themselves that priests, in their fragile humanity, were in a better position to offer healing to others because they had experienced the need for such healing in their own lives. What I think the author of the book was really trying to say is that the awareness of our own brokenness brings with it the possibility of true and deep compassion for others; it is this quality of compassion which is essential for any true healing to take place.

Nouwen of course was speaking primarily of spiritual healing rather than physical healing, but as we reflect together today on the last one hundred and twenty years I doubt if there is a single person in this Chapel who believes that the excellence of the physical healing and care which has been the hallmark, and still is, of St John of God Hospital, is somehow more important than, or separate from, the mission of the hospital which is summed up in different formulations, but which is, to my mind, best expressed in the three words – *hospitality, healing and hope*.

In today's gospel we have continued the reading of chapter six of Saint John's gospel, which presents the teaching by Jesus of himself as the Bread of Life. That teaching, so strange to the ears of the people of Jesus' own time, and perhaps to many of our contemporaries as well, began to make sense at the Last Supper, when Jesus took the bread and wine and transformed them into his body and blood, given to his disciples as food and drink for their journey of faith. When Jesus, the next day, gave up his body and spilled his blood for love of God's people, the even deeper meaning of Jesus' gift of himself was revealed. Through his life, which culminated in his death and was transformed in the resurrection, Jesus became, and remains, the source of healing, of wholeness and of life lived to the full. In doing this, and in leading us to understand the profound link between what he did at the Last Supper and what he did on the cross, Jesus both shows us the way and strengthens us for the journey. At the Last Supper he said to his disciples, "*Do this in memory of me*". He says the same to us today. Just as he gave his life for us, so now he calls us to give our lives for him and for those he loves – and this is exactly what has been happening here at St John of God Subiaco for the last one hundred and twenty



years. The Mass, the Eucharist, has been celebrated in this hospital from the very beginning and still is today. And equally, for the last 120 years, and still today, people have been giving of themselves, just as Jesus gave of himself, so that others might have life and have it to the full. The Eucharist, in other words, has been and still is, both celebrated and lived.

This is surely what true hospitality really means. On the part of the one who is offering hospitality, it is more than the gift of food and drink: hospitality is really a gift of self for the sake of the other. True hospitality is generous, open-hearted, warm and welcoming. It is in fact a real act of discipleship for Jesus too was generous, open-hearted, warm and welcoming. And because he was all this, and we are as his disciples trying to be all this, our hospitality is healing, and redeeming and restoring, just as Jesus' ministry and his whole life was healing, and redeeming and restoring. It is no accident then that when a well-known Australian scripture scholar, Fr Brendan Byrne, wrote a book on the Gospel of Saint Luke, he called it "*The Hospitality of God*".

If hospitality, true and heart-felt hospitality, is healing, as it surely is, then it is also a source of hope. Of course, when people come to hospital they are looking for, and hoping for, healing. They come because they are sick and they want to get well. Often this is the outcome – but sometimes it is not. But whether a person recovers from his or her illness, or must accept that he or she is entering into the process of dying, the need and the yearning for hope is still there: and again it is that deep hospitality, that warm-hearted welcoming of the person as he or she is, which can be the ground of that person's hope. We all need to know that we are loved, and valued, and respected – and perhaps, as we enter into the final journey of our lives, we need this more than ever. For one hundred and twenty years St John of God Subiaco has been a place where hope has been sustained, or rediscovered, or even experienced for the first time. It still is this today – and will continue to be in the future.

"*Caritas Christi urget nos*"; the love of Christ urges us on. These words which appear on the banner brought forward at the beginning of Mass this morning, hold the key to ensuring that today's reality, and tomorrow's reality, are as rich and as life-giving as the last one hundred and twenty years have been. Caritas Christi – the love of Christ – can have two meanings. It can mean the love of Christ for us – and it can mean that love which we have for Christ. Here at St John of God it must mean both. The more we love Christ, because we know him and wish to live united with him and with each other because of him, the more we will be able to let him live in and through us and reach out, through us, with his healing hands. And of course, in the end, it is Christ's love for us which sustains and strengthens and emboldens and animates us. This love is and must remain the foundation of everything we are and seek to be and do here in this wonderful hospital.

Hospitality, healing and hope: may these be the precious gifts we offer to every single person who enters this hospital. We are indeed, all of us, wounded healers. None of us is perfect and we all make mistakes. But if our own need for healing, as we recognise and acknowledge it, can teach us compassion, then we will be the instruments, the signs and bearers, of God's healing love. And this, in the end, is what it is to be a disciple of Jesus. This, in the end, is why this hospital exists.