

ST CAMILLUS DE LELLIS, FOUNDER OF THE MINISTERS OF THE SICK (AD. 1614)

Camillus de Lellis was born in 1550 at Bocchianico in the Abruzzi, when his mother was nearly sixty. He grew to be a very big man—6 feet 6 inches tall and the rest in proportion—and when he was seventeen he went off with his father to fight with the Venetians against the Turks; but soon he had contracted that painful and repulsive disease in his leg that was to afflict him for the rest of his life. In 1571 he was admitted to the San Giacomo hospital for incurables at Rome, as a patient and servant; after nine months he was dismissed, for his quarrelsomeness among other things, and he returned to active service in the Turkish war. Though Camillus habitually referred to himself as a great sinner, his worst disorder was an addiction to gambling that continually reduced him to want and shame. All playing at lawful games for exorbitant sums, and all games of hazard for considerable sums, are forbidden by the law of nature, by the laws of civilized nations, and by the canons of the Church. No contract is justifiable in which neither reason nor proportion is observed. Nor can it be consistent with justice for a man to stake any sum on blind chance, or to expose, without a reasonable equivalent or necessity, so much of his own or opponent's money, that the loss would notably distress himself or any other person. A spirit of gaming often springs from avarice; it is so hardened as to rejoice in the losses of others and is the source and occasion of many other vices. Such considerations, if they were ever put plainly before Camillus, left him cold: in the autumn of 1574 he gambled away his savings, his arms, everything down to the proverbial shirt, which was stripped off his back in the streets of Naples.

The indigence to which he had reduced himself, and the memory of a vow he had made in a fit of remorse to join the Franciscans, caused him to accept work as a labourer on the new Capuchin buildings at Manfredonia, and there a moving exhortation which the guardian of the friars one day made him completed his conversion. Ruminating on it as he rode upon his business, he at length fell on his knees, and with tears deplored his past unthinking life, and cried to Heaven for mercy. This happened on Candlemas day in the year 1575, the twenty-fifth of his age; and from that time he never interrupted his penitential course. He entered the novitiate of the Capuchins, but could not be admitted to profession on account of the disease in his leg. He therefore returned to the hospital of San Giacomo and devoted himself to the service of the sick. The administrators, having been witnesses to his charity and ability, after some time appointed him superintendent of the hospital.

In those days the spiritual and physical conditions in hospitals were such as it is now difficult to credit, conditions largely due to the necessity of employing any staff that could be got, even criminals. Camillus, grieving to see the unscrupulousness and slackness of hired servants in attending the sick, formed a project of associating for that office some of the attendants who desired to devote themselves to it out of a motive of charity. He found several persons so disposed, but met with great obstacles in the execution of his design, particularly from that jealousy and suspicion that are so often provoked by disinterested reformers. To make himself more useful in spiritually assisting the sick, he resolved, with the approval of his confessor, St. Philip Neri, to receive holy orders, and was ordained by the vicegerent of Rome, Thomas Goldwell, Bishop of St. Asaph, the exiled last bishop of the old English hierarchy. A certain gentleman of Rome named Fermo Caivi gave him an annuity as his title of ordination. Camillus decided to sever connection with San Giacomo and start on his own, though to do so was contrary to the advice of St. Philip; so with two companions he laid the foundations of his congregation: he prescribed certain short rules, and they went every day to the great hospital of the Holy Ghost, where they served the sick with so much affection and diligence that it was visible to all who saw them that they considered Christ Himself as lying sick or wounded in his members.

They made the beds of the patients, paid them every office of charity, and by their exhortations disposed them for the last sacraments and a happy death. The founder had powerful adversaries and great difficulties to struggle with, but by confidence in God he conquered them all. In 1585 he hired a larger house, and the success of his undertaking encouraged him to extend his activities: so he ordained that the members of his congregation should bind themselves to serve persons infected with the plague, prisoners, and those who lie dying in private houses; later, in 1595 and 1601, some of his religious were sent with the troops fighting in Hungary and Croatia, thus forming the first recorded “military field ambulance.” Nothing can deprive Henry Dunant of his honour for the part he played in the foundation of the International Red Cross; but the memory should not be lost of those who before him concerned themselves with the wounded in battle, who include St. Camillus de Lellis as well as Florence Nightingale.

In 1588 Camillus was invited to Naples, and with twelve companions founded there a new house. Certain galleys having the plague on board were forbidden to enter the harbour, so the Ministers of the Sick (for that was the name they took) went on board, and attended them: on which occasion two of their number died of the pestilence, and were the first martyrs of charity in this institute. St. Camillus showed a like charity in Rome when a pestilential fever swept off great numbers, and again when that city was visited by a violent famine. In 1591 Gregory XIV erected this congregation into a religious order, for perpetually serving the sick. They are now reckoned as clerks regular, are about equally divided between priests and lay-brothers, and follow their original work of nursing all sick persons without distinction, privately or in hospitals, or elsewhere. The founder was, as has already been said, himself afflicted with many corporal sufferings: the disease in his leg for forty-six years; a rupture for thirty-eight years; two sores in the sole of one of his feet, which gave him great pain; and, for a long time before he died, a distaste for food and inability to retain it. Under this complication of infirmities he would not suffer anyone to wait on him, but sent all his brethren to serve others. When he was not able to stand he would creep out of his bed, even in the night, and crawl from one patient to another to see if they wanted anything. Among many evils and dangers which the zeal of St. Camillus prevented, his attention to the care of the dying soon made him discover that in hospitals many were buried alive. Hence he ordered his religious to continue the prayers for souls yet in their agony for at least a quarter of an hour after they seemed to have drawn their last breath, and not to suffer their faces to be covered so soon as was usual, lest those who were not dead should be smothered. St. Camillus saw the foundation of fifteen houses of his brothers and eight hospitals, and Almighty God acknowledged his zeal and selflessness by the spirit of prophecy and the gift of miracles, and by many heavenly communications and favours.

The saint laid down the canonical leadership of his order in 1607. But he assisted at the general chapter in Rome in 1613, and after it, with the new superior general, visited the houses, giving them his last exhortations. At Genoa he was extremely ill; he recovered so as to be able to finish the visitation of his hospitals, but soon relapsed, and his life was now despaired of. He received viaticum from the hands of Cardinal Ginnasi, and when he received the last anointing he made a moving exhortation to his brethren; he expired on July 14, 1614, being sixty-four years old. St. Camillus de Lellis was canonized in 1746, and was, with St. John-of-God, declared patron of the sick by Pope Leo XIII, and of nurses and nursing associations by Pope Pius XI.

The earliest account we possess of the saint's activities is the life which Father S. Cicatelli published in 1615, a year after his death; Cicatelli had been his companion for twenty-six years. This life was translated into

English in the Oratorian series edited by Father Faber. There have been many others since, notably those by BSumker in German, and by Blanc and Latarche in French; but by far the fullest, based on a study of letters and original documents, is that by Mario Vanti, *S. Camilla de Lellis* (1929); see also his *San Giacomo degl' Incurabili di Roma . . .* (1938). There is an excellent biography in English by Fr. C. C. Martindale (1946); and cf. A. C. Oldmeadow, *Camillus: the Red Cross Saint* (1923).

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