Camillus de Lellis (1550–1614), Patron Saint of Hospitals

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Abstract

Camillus de Lellis was an Italian nobleman born in 1550 who served as a soldier fighting the Turks. Three times between 1571 and 1584 his abscessed leg forced him to seek care in a Roman hospital; each time he worked there during and after his treatment. He was disgusted by the bad care in the hospital and decided a religious order devoted to helping the sick was the best way to better physical and spiritual care. In 1585 he founded the Ministers of the Sick, today called the Order of Saint Camillus. It gained full papal approval as a religious order in 1591. By 1607 it had 242 members working in ten leading Italian cities.

Saint Camillus was born to a noble family in the small town of Bucchianico di Chieti of Abruzzi, east of Rome near the Adriatic coast. As a young man he seemed the very opposite of a saintly caregiver. He was addicted to gambling, particularly playing cards. He was six and a half feet tall with broad shoulders, huge for that day, and he was noted for his hot temper. He earned the title of “big bully.” He seemed the perfect type for a soldier and in 1567 joined the Venetian army to fight the Turks. He developed a severe abscess in his right leg. He went to Rome in 1571 seeking a cure at the Hospital of San Giacomo. After a partial cure, he continued to work at the hospital until he was fired in December of that year for his gambling habits, quarreling with fellow employees, and neglecting his work.³ He returned to fighting the Turks, first in the Venetian army, then in the Spanish army in 1574. He had several close

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brushes with death, from the Turks, storms at sea, and typhus.⁴ Meanwhile he made a vow to become a Franciscan; he was admitted as a novice but was required to leave when the abscess on his leg returned. He was readmitted to the Hospital of San Giacomo for four weeks in 1575 as a patient, then once more worked there, first as a servant, then as a lower administrator, and finally as manager of the physical plant in 1579. He then tried to become a Capuchin, but his leg wound re-opened, and he was dismissed. Again he returned to San Giacomo Hospital, this time serving as general supervisor from 1579 to 1584. Camillus was not pleased by the hospital's nurses, all of them men. They were untrained and disliked their work, but could find no other job. They did not care about the patients, they often left them uncleaned, the hospital stank, and diseases spread. The nurses often showed disrespect for their patients. Often the staff failed to call a priest in to help the dying. Camillus did not have the power to bring sweeping reforms at San Giacomo. He did what he could. He arranged for better food for the sick, for a priest to distribute the Eucharist once a week, and for Jesuit novices to come in and help care for the sick. He gathered a cluster of like-minded reformers, but his reforms met opposition from other administrators at the hospital.⁵ On August 15, 1582, he had a religious experience that convinced him that there was need for a religious order which would devote itself exclusively to helping the sick. Saint John of God (1495–1550) had set up a hospital for the poor in Granada, Spain, in 1539 and with several followers had founded the Brothers Hospitallers. After his death they spread their work and were recognized as a new religious order. Camillus considered joining them, but his bad leg again stood in the way.⁶

During these years Saint Philip Neri was his confessor and spiritual advisor. Camillus began taking courses at the Jesuit Roman College and was ordained a priest in 1584. He and two good friends, Bernardino Norcino and Curzio Lodi, together left San Giacomo that same year. Neri wanted Camillus to return to San Giacomo; when he refused, Neri refused to continue as his confessor.⁷ The reasons for Neri's action are unclear; the loss of the three men undoubtedly hurt the work of reform at San Giacomo, but it may be that Neri was worried that the Roman prostitutes who frequented the area near the Hospital of Santo Spirito might prove a temptation to Camillus and his two friends. Nonetheless they moved to the Hospital of Santo Spirito in Rome, which they took over and reformed, helped financially by Fermo Calvi. This was a huge project. The largest ward had three hundred beds. It is estimated that the hospital had 10,000 patients in 1549 and 1550.⁸ There Camillus sought to give his own personal care to the worst cases, jobs that others found disgusting. On September 15, 1585, Camillus gave short cassocks to Bernardino and Curzio; this action was later seen as the foundation of the Camillan religious order, today officially known as the Order of St. Camillus.⁹ That same year new recruits came forward, a larger house was rented, and Camillus started drawing up a rule for the religious order. He wanted the order to be known as the Ministers of the Sick. He

gave a draft of the rule to a cardinal who was his friend. The cardinal arranged an audience with Pope Sixtus V on March 18, 1586. The pope blessed him and gave informal approval to the rule.

In 1588 the order opened a new house in Naples and took the name Ministers of the Sick. Bubonic plague struck Naples, and two members died helping plague victims, the first of many Camillans to sacrifice their lives helping plague victims. At the end of the sixteenth century the Camillans pioneered something new: special nursing units to help wounded soldiers, in this case those fighting the Turks in the Balkans. In 1591 Pope Gregory XIV gave the Camillans formal approval as a religious order. Later that year Camillus and twenty-five other members took the usual solemn vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, but added a special vow to give physical and spiritual help to the sick. The Camillans wore a distinctive cassock with a red cross on their chest. Their hospitals made special efforts to provide good ventilation, good food, and spiritual care, and to keep isolated those with infectious diseases. Camillus made sure that his men were well trained. All this is routine today, but it was innovative in the sixteenth century. He also wanted his men to avoid administrative work in hospitals so they could concentrate on taking personal care of the sick. His rule stressed charity and serving the sick. Often the rule got down to details: help the sick to eat, be gentle in lifting patients, confer with their doctors on their needs, wash the sick, and make their beds.

In August 1590 a plague broke out in Rome. Its impact on the people of Rome was worse than the famous Sack of Rome in 1527. Rome's population was about 140,000. By January 1591 it was down by some twenty-three thousand people, mostly victims of the plague. Food was scarce, families often locked themselves in their homes but then fell victim to plague or hunger, their bodies left to rot. Camillus organized his men and others to hand out food and find the sick. Camillus went around the city, often climbing through windows and rescuing babies left behind by their dead or dying parents, and providing them with milk. He organized a huge soup kitchen at the Camillan Church of the Madalena. Not just food but clean clothes were handed out to the needy.¹⁰

Despite several chronic illnesses, Camillus gave himself to helping the sick, but his health kept declining, and he resigned as head of the order in 1607. During his lifetime Camillan communities were founded in Rome, Naples, Milan, Genoa, Bologna, Florence, Ferrara, Messina, Mantua, Viterbo, his own hometown of Bucchianico, and several other small towns. Only later did the order spread outside Italy. By 1607 the order had 242 members and 80 novices. Before his retirement as superior general that year, Camillus had visited most of these communities.¹¹ He died at Rome on July 14, 1614 at age sixty-four. Many of Rome's leading churchmen came to visit him during his last illness.¹²

Probably his most famous statement is "The poor and the sick are the heart of God. In serving them we serve Jesus the Lord."¹³ He was

canonized in 1746. Pope Leo XIII named Camillus and St. John of God co-patron saints of hospitals and the sick. Two female branches of the Camillans were founded in the nineteenth century.

Notes

¹ John Patrick Donnelly, “New Religious Orders for Men,” in *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, volume 6, *Reform and Expansion*, ed. R. Po-Chia Hsia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 162–179.

² John Patrick Donnelly, ed. and trans., *Jesuit Writings of the Early Modern Period, 1540–1640* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2006).

³ Mario Vanti, *St. Camillus and His Ministry of the Sick*, trans. Charles Dyer (Manila: St. Camillus Seminary, n.d.), 22.

⁴ Ibid., 23–24.

⁵ Cyril Charles Martindale, *The Life of St. Camillus* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1946), 29–31.

⁶ Ibid., 34.

⁷ Ibid., 35–39, 44–45.

⁸ Ibid., 35–39, 49–54.

⁹ Ibid., 40.

¹⁰ Ibid., 72–74.

¹¹ Vanti traces Camillus’s work in founding and visiting these new communities, *St. Camillus and His Ministry*, 261–303.

¹² Martindale, *The Life of St. Camillus*, 140–152.

¹³ Mario Vanti examines the spirituality and prayer life of Camillus in his *The Spirit of St. Camillus de Lellis*, trans. Richard Korzinek, O.S.C (Quezon City, Philippines: Camillian Publications, 1980).