

Letter of **Cardinal Angelo Sodano**, Secretary of State of His Holiness, to the Superior General of the Camillians on the occasion of the institution of the **‘Day of Camillian Religious Martyrs to Charity’**
25 may 1994

Most Reverend Father,

The Supreme Pontiff has learnt with pleasure that the Consulta of the most worthy Order of the Ministers of the Sick, following the recommendations of the General Chapter, has instituted the ‘Day of Camillian Religious Martyrs to Charity’ which is to be celebrated every year throughout the Order on 25 May, the anniversary of the birth of St. Camillus de Lellis.

The heritage of history and your contemporary activity, the original inspiration and an incumbent adaptation to the changed conditions of the times (cf. *Perfectae caritatis*, n 2), can find a fertile synthesis in this ‘Day of Memory’ and offer valuable reasons for renewed zeal in apostolic and charitable service. It is important that in today’s Church, as well, the Camillian charism continues to shine forth in all its splendour, a charism which through the fourth vow consecrates to God, in service to the sick men, a readiness ‘to die willingly’ as well as to be ‘strong champions of Christ, and True Knights of his Cross (S. Cicatelli, *Vita del P. Camillo de Lellis...*, in Viterbo 1615, p. 113).

Through suitable and diligent historical research it has been possible to illuminate the supreme sacrifice of over three hundred religious of this Family – amongst whom figure priests, brothers, clerics, novices and oblates –, the victims of infectious diseases who died following the care they provided to the sick with heroic dedication, in the imitation of Christ who loved us and gave his life for us (cf. Gal 2:20).

In obeying the invitation to implement without reservations the divine commandment of love, these dead brothers outlined a journey which, in addition to constituting a reason for glory for this most worthy Institute, also offers a very eloquent witness to authentic ministry at the service of physical health and the spiritual salvation of man: ‘this is my commandment: that you should love one another as I have loved you. No man has greater love than this, that he lays down his life for his friends. You will be my friends if you do what I command you’ (Jn 15:12-14).

The sacrifice of these brothers, moved by love unto total self-giving (cf. Eph 5:25) is ‘the exaltation of a person’s perfect humanity and true life’ (*Veritatis splendor*, n. 92). Man, indeed, who on earth is the only creature which God willed for himself, is fully fulfilled only ‘through a sincere gift of himself’ (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 24). The gift of one’s own life, actuated in the patient acceptance of suffering provoked by the irruption of a painful trial, offers to the Church community and to civil society itself ‘a solemn proclamation and missionary commitment *usque ad sanguinem*’ (*Veritatis splendor*, n. 93) which contributes in a very effective way to the germination of the seed of the Gospel.

The full retrieval and appreciation of this valuable heritage of the Camillian Order thus also constitutes a particularly significant proclamation for contemporary man, who is more ready to believe ‘in witnesses than in teachers, in experience than in teaching, and in life and action than in theories’ (*Redemptoris missio*, n. 42). The invitation of St. Camillus de Lellis to be faithful to the fourth vow ‘*etiam pestis incesserit*’ (Gregory XIV, Bull *Illius qui pro gregis*, n. 1) sounds out unaltered in our time whose new evils, in a different cultural, social and economic context, postulate the same readiness to engage in the heroic witness of charity. Dedication unto heroism is one of the defining aspects of the prophetic character of religious life which by its nature ‘not only witnesses to the fact of a new and eternal life acquired by the redemption of Christ, but foretells the future resurrection and the glory of the heavenly kingdom’ (*Lumen gentium*, n. 44).

The celebration of this Day, which is dedicated to the ‘martyrs to charity’, should not thus be reduced to a simple moment of re-evocation, but, rather, should become an opportunity to draw upon the memory of these brothers to have a renewed enthusiasm which animates, every day of the year, a ministry exposed to the foreseen or unpredictable risks of care for those who suffer. In this way, your religious Family will offer its own generous contribution to the reflection of the whole of the Church during a year when the Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops is asking itself about consecrated life and its mission in the Christian community and the world.

Invoking the heavenly protection of the Most Holy Virgin, whose maternal love for her suffering son St. Camillus wanted to be an inspiration for your service for the sick, His Holiness sends his cordial good wishes and hopes that the celebration of the Day of the memory of these heroic brothers of yours may bear abundant spiritual fruits and help to renew your generous resolutions to imitate their example: with these feelings the Holy Father bestows in a heartfelt way on you, on your brothers and on all suffering people that you meet in your daily ministry a special Apostolic Blessing.

Cardinal Angelo Sodano
Secretary of State