

The Martyrs of Charity (25 May – the Birth of St. Camillus)

But it was a most just thing that the ‘Ministers of the Sick’ also won on the field of their labours the palm of martyrdom in self-sacrifice, providing care to their sick neighbours. By divine testimony: ‘there is no greater love – in fact – than this, laying down one’s own life for the health of our brethren’. The fourth solemn vow by which the Sons of St. Camillus pledge themselves to care for the sick, even the plague-stricken, has asked and continually asks for victims so as to crown them with glory. To die, or even only to expose oneself to the risk of dying, by caring for the plague-stricken is – St. Charles Borromeo argued – to be martyrs. And we have, I would say, almost official proof of this in the Church which on 26 February in the Roman roll of martyrs indicates that in Alexandria in Egypt there is a memorial on that day of those many saints – priests and deacons – who between 249 and 262 died caring for the plague-stricken, thereby receiving the honour from Christians of the glorious title of martyrs.

However such has been, and is, the view of the ‘Ministers of the Sick’ who have looked to this end as an honour and a most worthy glory: ‘The Martyrdom of Charity’.

The number of those who have gloriously encountered this martyrdom is over three hundred. The Order has written, in so much as this is possible, the names of these heroes in the golden album of charity. But many of them are not known about. As Cardinal Parocchi observes, ‘the names of most of them are unknown...Friends of the Angels, those who take care of dying poor people, their names are written in golden letters in the book of life by the Angel of the resurrection, the more they were buried in tombs and in the silence of death with their deeds being lost, the more luminous will they shine in the tabernacles of the Lord’.

‘For that matter’, the Father General Fr. Cicatelli wrote in 1624, ‘other witnesses we do not want other than the compassionate eyes of God and our burials full of Fathers and Brothers who died to serve their neighbours’. In that year, a decade after the death of the Founder, the roll of martyrs of the ‘Ministers of the Sick’ was reopened to write in it the names of those sons who were most dear to Camillus.

The plague broke out in Palermo and nine religious (out of the nine that were there) died there as martyrs to charity, amongst whom Father Pasquale **‘who in one voice many religious and secular people say was a saint because with so much ardour of charity did he follow the Founder than one has to believe that he went with him to enjoy the blessed vision in heaven’.**

The good pastor had already been present during the plague of (1589) where, although the palm then escaped him, he did not lose hope and the wish to win it later on. The next year (1625) in Genoa, with the Spanish fleet Father Francesco met death while caring together with his other religious brothers those rowers who had been struck by the plague.

In 1630 the Asian disease assaulted many cities in Italy. Manzoni describes to us the horrors of the plague in Milan of which the sixty ‘Ministers of the Sick’ who lived in that city were witnesses. In addition to the constant care that they provided at the Great Hospital, they worked tirelessly at the refuge of Porta Orientale, which is celebrated by Manzoni in his work.

In Milan alone at that time seventeen sons of Camillus died. Amongst these was the good Brother Olimpo Nofri, much loved by the Founder who said that he was ‘excellent in service to the poor’.

This heroic brother after exhausting his strength in caring for the plague-stricken, noticing that he, too, had the disease, so that his religious brothers would not be distracted from serving other people by taking care of him, dragged himself after receiving the sacraments outside Porta Ludovica to the cemetery and there awaited his death.

Mantua, which had been besieged since October of the previous year (1629), found in the 'Ministers of the Sick' angels of comfort and defence against the Lansquenets – 'savages, mercenaries, rapacious, who pitilessly sacked the city...The religious managed to impose themselves on those barbarians through the strength of their virtue' and secured the end of the sacking of the city. The plague entered with that infernal invasion. The 'Sons of Camillus' 'were employed, specifically and as the first to do so, in the hospitals and the hospital of the infected of St. George...**They were amidst all the deaths...running everywhere to give comfort to the dying poor...and after being worn out by that afflicted people, they rose, when dying, to heaven as the victims of charity, expiatory hosts, burnt offerings, to make propitious divine mercy'. Fifteen of them, and thus more or less all of them, went on to receive the prize of their sacrifice. Amongst these was Fr. Antonio Buccelli who had been amongst the fortunate religious to be present when Camillus died.**

In the year 1630 the plague also struck in Bologna and caused, it appears, thirty thousand victims. 'The Fathers of Good Dying', as the citizenry called them, went to the 'Annunziata e di S. Giuseppe' hospital for the infected, outside Porta Saragozza, to help those who were afflicted by the disease, to help them to die well and to die there themselves – seven of them met this fate.

In Borgonuovo (Piacenza) another four 'Ministers of the Sick' died amongst the plague-stricken, amongst whom there was Fr. Marapodio who is remembered for his most burning love for Jesus the Eucharist and the poor. After in a pious way caring for the plague-stricken to the point of exhaustion, he himself was struck by the diseases He dragged himself to the foot of the tabernacle and there, in adoration, he breathed his last. Another seven religious won the palm of the martyrdom of charity in Mondovì in the same year. Amongst these figure Father Pizzorno, Father Morelli and Father Lavagna who felt especial affection for Camillus. In Florence and Lucca the massacre was less strong but it nonetheless required of the Order another four glorious victims, amongst whom there were two who are especially well known: Fr. Bisogni, in Florence, and Fr. Domenico De Martino, in Lucca. The second lived for a long time side by side with the Founder.

In Rome, almost every day of that year, news arrived about the generous apostolate and the glorious death of these religious. Thus it was that the Major Superiors could not hold back from deciding to enter the fray themselves, especially in Bologna. The Father General, Pieri, the members of the General Consultor Father Novati, Father Zazio and Father Prandi, indeed, organised themselves to hurry to that city. Before leaving they went to Cardinal Ginnasi, the Protector of the Order, to take their leave, and they saw him much moved and in tears, saying to them: **'Thank you, Almighty God, for making me see men who are your Servants, men who despise this life, to serve you also amidst the difficulties and dangers in your poor, only with the motive of holy charity'.**

Two of them caught the plague and one of them died there; the others were spared for new undertakings and subsequent labours. From 1630 onwards 'cleaning houses' or disinfection offices were established, above all for goods and correspondence that came from places where the plague was present.

The Sons of Camillus accepted a job that was as sensitive as regards responsibilities as it was very onerous: with 'sprays of sulphur, bitumen, mixtures of resinous substances, and above all with direct flames', they subjected to disinfection what was thought to be infected. In such work the **'Ministers**

of the Sick' continued for a century and a half, and they had as a prize a notable number of victims. First Fr. Zazio, who had the most experience in doing such work, who was hailed as the saviour of Imola for foreseeing what might happen and defending the city against invasion by the disease. In those 'cleaning houses' he lost his sight and his life was shortened.

But the plague which only just failed to eliminate (this is something which for that matter it could not have achieved) the religious family of Camillus de Lellis was the one that broke out in 1656-1657. It afflicted in particular the south of Italy where it found most of the army with the red cross of St. Camillus ready to bear it and tackle it.

Naples was the city that was most sorely tested. 'Without sparing themselves at all, the Ministers of the Sick threw themselves into the dangers, serving everyone in the hospital and the hospital for the infected'. And there was great emotion when the Father Provincial Prospero Voltabio, who had grown up in the school of Camillus, gathered together all the religious and asked them to agree to go to the hospital for the infected: **'all of them immediately threw themselves to the ground and beseeched him to be assigned to that service'**.

The Lord accepted the sacrifice of all of them. They were distributed between four houses, one of which, the house of the novitiate, was the most flourishing of the Order. Sooner or later all of them went to the battlefield to be crowned with victory through the supreme sacrifice. 'Of the religious priests alone, ninety-six were scythed down by death' of the hundred that existed before the plague. The four survivors, for that matter, also suffered because of the disease. In this ruinous chaos, memories and documents were lost and of these glorious victims we have only the names of twenty-seven fathers, amongst whom were Prospero Voltabio, Giovanni Battista Crescenzi, Luigi Franco, and Troiano Positani whom we have admired at the side of the Founder and who were trained in his school. Of the brothers we know the names of only thirteen. Those of all the rest are marked only in the golden book of charity in heaven.

The plague visited in a sinister way Gaeta, Chieti, and Bucchianico, finding everywhere the 'Red Cross of St. Camillus' in arms. In Rome, as well, both to prevent contagion in the 'cleaning houses' and to care for those who were afflicted by the plague in the island hospital for the infected of St. Bartholomew some 'Ministers of the Sick' lost their lives. **Indeed the Father General himself, Fr. Antonio Albiti, the worthy commander of his peaceful army, made there when dying his last recommendation to persevere 'in entire service to God in order to be always ministers and faithful servants of the sick poor'.**

In Viterbo another two victims joined the already large number of those who had previously died. But it was in Genoa above all that the 'Ministers of the Sick' achieved a triumph that was only a little inferior to that of Naples.

It is believed that the plague killed 64,000 citizens of that city. Certainly, the fifty Sons of St. Camillus who went to care for them 'were all struck down by the disease, and thirty-seven of these died'. The most lamented victim was Brother Giacomo Giacometti who crowned in such a worthy way a life of hard work and immolation in the apostolate of nursing charity.

Another field of work and merit for heaven was Turin during the epidemic of 1679. After a few years of truce, the army of the **'Red Cross of St. Camillus'** appeared once again in the field for the plague of 1709 in Genoa, and of 1714 and 1732 in Rome, leaving behind it some further victims in these cities. But the plague that was most famous in a sinister sense of the eighteenth century was that which broke out in Messina in 1743. The twenty-six religious who lived in that city offered themselves completely with great generosity to their sacrifice. **The young novices, edified and**

stimulated by the example of their elders, asked to admitted immediately to their profession in order to enter the fray with death. Because this was not granted to them, by their own volition they offered themselves to God by a vow to endure in service to the plague-stricken to the point of sacrificing themselves.

To their parents, who had come to ask for them at the gate of the religious house, these tender flowers, these martyrs, answered: ‘Because the Lord has called us to a religion dedicated to service to the sick, even when they have the plague, we believe it is our duty to die in this religion and to die engaged in this service’. Heaven, indeed, blessed and accepted their sacrifice which they all engaged in with generosity on the altar of charity.

The plague was followed in the nineteenth century by cholera. From 1835 to 1911 on a number of occasions and in various places this disease was always in contact with the Red Cross of St. Camillus which was crowned with continual triumphs and registered new victims. During wars, which afflicted Europe from 1595 and until the last one of 1914-1918, the ‘Ministers of the Sick’ appeared hither and thither on the battlefields, under the aegis of the purple Cross of the Blood of Christ, in order to mitigate the lethal consequences of armed hatred and to remind men that we are all, by the merit of the Lord, brothers. Nor did there fail to be for the Sons of St. Camillus a harvest in their field of nursing charity which indeed was always superabundant, even though a new array of gospel workers entered it in order to share the labours and the harvest.

The ‘Ministers of the Sick’ believe that the beautiful words of Christ are addressed to them: **‘Be happy, little flock, because it has pleased my Father to give you his kingdom!’ – the Kingdom of charity!** In hospitals, in hospitals for infected people, in sanatoriums and in leper hospitals as well, the Sons of St. Camillus, in conformity with the promise of their Father, have found their Indies and their Japan, not only for an apostolate for the propagation of the gospel but also in order to win in them the palm of a slow and less dramatic, but perhaps before God equally sublime, martyrdom.

The plague and cholera, thanks be to God, no longer produce the fatal parades of death of other epochs. Nor are hospitals sweaty hotels that are foul-smelling in their misery. However, in addition to the moral infection, which is much more grave, that dwells in them, there is in them, in a physical form as well, a perpetual and fatal threat of new and widespread forms of the plague and infection, which are that much more mephitic because they are not the consequence only of corruption of bodies but also, and far too often, unfortunately, also of souls. And with the exception of these, ‘tuberculosis’ has an undisputed primacy over all the other previous forms of plague, cholera, smallpox, and this to such an extent that every year it is responsible for two-thirds of deaths. The Ministers of the Sick in the hospitals and sanatoriums that are entrusted to their management are always engaged in the full implementation of their fourth solemn vow to care for the plague-stricken. If thanks to God they can foresee, because of the successive happy discoveries of medical science, an easier immunity, this in addition to prolonging the suffering of their apostolate is not always the case, and thus finds still amongst the generous, who sacrifice themselves with more zeal, some victims of charity.

And may heaven be pleased to grant many such victims to the Order of the Ministers of the Sick! Because, in addition to making of them its finest glory, they are still the wellsprings that feed the new fountains, just as at one time the blood of martyrs was the seed of Christians. It is specifically because of this spirit of heroic charity on which the Order is based, by the fourth solemn vow to care for the sick, even when diseased, that the Supreme Pontiff Leo XIII said that he was struck with wonder and admiration for the Order of the Ministers of the Sick.

From the *Positio Super Dubio* of St. Camillus [“Notula Patrum mortuorum in servitio Infirmorum peste affectorum”](#)

From the book by M. Vanti, *San Camillo de Lellis (1550-1614)*, Libreria Editrice Francesco Ferrari, Rome, 1929, pp. 681-689