

INTER-CONGREGATIONAL PASTORAL LETTER  
*The Camillian Religious – The Daughters of St. Camillus*  
*The Women Ministers of the Sick of St. Camillus*  
*The Holy Year of Mercy – 2016*

**BEING CAMILLIANS**

**CAMILLO, Enrico, Maria Domenica, Luigi, Giuseppina, Nicola, Germana, Ettore, Aristeo ...**

**The call to be witnesses and prophets of the mercy of God!**

*We cannot escape the Lord's words to us, and they will serve as the criteria upon which we will be judged: whether we have fed the hungry and given drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger and clothed the naked, or spent time with the sick and those in prison (cf. Mt 25:31-45). Moreover, we will be asked if we have helped others to escape the doubt that causes them to fall into despair and which is often a source of loneliness; if we have helped to overcome the ignorance in which millions of people live, especially children deprived of the necessary means to free them from the bonds of poverty; if we have been close to the lonely and afflicted; if we have forgiven those who have offended us and have rejected all forms of anger and hate that lead to violence; if we have had the kind of patience God shows, who is so patient with us; and if we have commended our brothers and sisters to the Lord in prayer. **In each of these "little ones," Christ himself is present. His flesh becomes visible in the flesh of the tortured, the crushed, the scourged, the malnourished, and the exiled ... to be acknowledged, touched, and cared for by us.** Let us not forget the words of Saint John of the Cross: "as we prepare to leave this life, we will be judged on the basis of love" (Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus. Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy*, n. 15).*

*Finally, let us consider the saints, who exercised charity in an exemplary way...In his encounter "face to face" with the God who is Love, [man] senses the impelling need to transform his whole life into service of neighbour, in addition to service of God. This explains the great emphasis on hospitality, refuge and care of the infirm in the vicinity of the monasteries. It also explains the immense initiatives of human welfare and Christian formation, aimed above all at the very poor, who became the object of care firstly for the monastic and mendicant orders, and later for the various male and female religious institutes all through the history of the Church. The figures of saints such as Francis of Assisi, Ignatius of Loyola, John of God, Camillus of Lellis, Vincent de Paul, Louise de Marillac, Giuseppe B. Cottolengo, John Bosco, Luigi Orione, Teresa of Calcutta to name but a few—stand out as lasting models of social charity for all people of good will. The saints are the true bearers of light within history, for they are men and women of faith, hope and love (Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas est. Encyclical Letter on Christian Love*, n. 40).*

*Care provided to the needs and the physical and spiritual sufferings of the sick means the extension of the inexhaustible mercy and patience and goodness of the Lord Jesus who bent down before the miseries of humanity wounded by sin, and through care for bodies in pain gave peace and salvation to souls. Your presence in hospitals, in nursing homes, at the bedsides of the poor and those in need should, therefore, be a constant irradiation of the charity of Christ, the lived apologetics of the delicacy, the disinterestedness, and the heroism, if this is necessary, of those who have made the example of the Lord Jesus the only reason for their lives, the measure of measureless need, the secret spur of an impetus that is destined to break only with death' (Paul VI, 'Ai Camilliani', Vol. III, Tip. Pol. Vat., 1965, pp. 289-90).*

The mercy of God is not an idea that is disembodied in relation to reality and relegated to the world

of pious practices and devotions of the heart. It is, rather, a concrete experience that touches the histories and the wounds of every individual human being. This is borne witness to by the existential events and spiritual pathways of saints and blessed who have been privileged witnesses to how the love of God and His forgiveness in fact do not have limits. Amongst these witnesses, some made mercy 'their mission in life' in a more specific way; others became apostles of mercy and forgiveness by bending down to the deepest wounds of humanity.

It is for this reason that we have chosen to reflect upon the experience of mercy-compassion during this jubilee year of mercy, starting with the precious 'Camillian' memory that we have in common: the charism of mercy towards the suffering which was handed down to us by St. Camillus de Lellis, and read and reflected in the words, the choices, the decisions and the intimate spiritual universe of 'our' saints, blessed and servants of God.

Let us indeed call them 'prophets' of mercy. Men and women of God who, through their insights, their lives and their words, proclaimed that embrace of mercy of the Father narrated by Christ in the parable of the 'prodigal son' which is then transfigured into care, into the compassionate devotion of the 'Good Samaritan'.

Their names are inscribed in the great book of the history of our religious Institutes of Camillian inspiration and belong at the level of ideals to the book dedicated to those who may be seen as the 'blesseds' of forgiveness, of the divine caress, of the absolute welcome, of the gratuitous love, and of the gift of the heart to those who are in abject poverty, sick and in need.

### ***Saint Camillus de Lellis***

*'All of his contemplations, ecstasies, transports, and visions consisted in staying for almost entire nights staring above some dead or dying body or some other destroyed sick poor person. And he saw in those so harsh and butchered bodies the extreme misery of human life...And in such spectacles of horror he learnt to live to die, and they were always his books and his schools where he learnt to despise the world and love his neighbours'* (SANZIO CICATELLI, *Vita del P. Camillo de Lellis – Vms – 251*).

### ***The Blessed Giuseppina Vannini***

*'The inner ideas that trouble are never produced by a good spirit and thus are not from God. That total lack of confidence in God, with the fear of not being saved, is diabolical stuff. It is much better to abound in filial confidence in God than to doubt of such great goodness and mercy. It is clear that the devil would enjoy seeing you making the great error of leaving your post to look for greater quiet and perfection'* (MV letter 53 to Sr. Gerarda Legrand).

### ***The Blessed Enrico Rebuschini***

*'Care provided to the needs and the physical and spiritual sufferings of the sick means the extension of the inexhaustible mercy and patience and goodness of the Lord Jesus who bent down before the miseries of humanity wounded by sin, and through care for bodies in pain gave peace and salvation to souls. Your presence in hospitals, in nursing homes, at the bedsides of the poor and those in need should therefore be a constant irradiation of the charity of Christ, the lived apologetics of delicacy, disinterestedness and heroism. This Christic style seems to be the compendium of the resolutions and the apostolate of the Servant of God Enrico Rebuschini who faithfully followed the example and the teaching of Christ, and consecrated his life to service to the sick and sinners, to whom, with humility and charity, he widely distributed the gifts of Redemption, offering them the experience of the mercy of God and that sweetness of the Gospel that we all need (from the decree Super Virtutibus).*

### ***The Blessed Maria Domenica Brun Barbantini***

*'The omnipotence of God! How many delights, what magnificence presents itself to eyes that want to appreciate the goodness of a God Creator towards us base creatures! But I, a most base creature, how have I corresponded? How have I loved my Creator, my Redeemer, my generous Benefactor? My sins have demonstrated this enough. My ingratitude will always serve to humble me, to ask for mercy and*

*forgiveness, not to be dismayed, and never to be distrustful of divine mercy. Have courage, therefore, I also say to you my dear daughter... God does not want the death of a sinner, He wants her to convert and to live' (from Scritti spirituali, n. 80).*

### **The Blessed Luigi Tezza**

*'The only power you should wield is the power of sweet firmness, without weaknesses, and the **mercy** that always forgives, following the example of Jesus. Listen to him speaking to you, enter his thoughts, his struggles, his sufferings and his tribulations. Move into that mercy. Be resolute, realistic, just and good; speak little of yourself. **If you have sick women, care for them and have them cared for with the tenderness of a Mother'** (from Scritti, 1892).*

### **The Servant of God Nicola D'Onofrio**

*'St. Paul is aware that he is the apostle of nations, but solely because of the infinite mercy of God who converted him from sin. **We are a living monument to the mercy of God.** Jesus said to St. Catherine: "You are she who is not, I am He who is". This is the greatest reason for being able to humble oneself before the Almighty. This is an elementary thing, and yet almost nobody does it!...If we know the road that takes us to holiness, to work. We do not know how long we will live. When one possesses humility one immediately recognises how proud one is. From a humble man is released an irresistible appeal because of which the sinner is also laid low. To reach this there are many means that help us. **True humility lies in recognising one's own nothingness and loving it, hoping only in the infinite mercy of God,** otherwise humility would only be hopelessness. We always have before us the figure of humble Jesus (reflections on the margins of *Esercizi Spirituali*, 1960).*

### **The Servant of God Germana Sommaruga**

*'The action of Sommaruga unfolded in works of mercy of great spiritual and social range which also inaugurated new forms of the presence of women in the Church and the civil community.*

*After Jesus Christ and his Gospel, the principal source of inspiration for Germana was St. Camillus de Lellis, a shining example to whom was well applied the epithet 'giant of charity', who was capable of **demonstrating through his words and his works the fundamental aspects of the mercy of God** and promoting a reform of the world of health care and care for the sick which still today has to be fully implemented.*

*From St. Camillus, Germana learnt the extraordinary lesson of **mercy and compassion towards the sick which sprung from the gospel parable of the Good Samaritan:** she thus learnt to be at the side of the sick and ensured that other women and other men, like her, were attracted by love that was received and given during moments of pain. She also committed herself to ensuring that the Camillian style of approaching suffering was not limited to being concerned about alleviating physical needs but also took care of the human spirit, which is often sicker and more wounded than the body (from the testimony of Cardinal Dionigi Tettamanzi, Archbishop of Milan).*

### **The Servant of God Ettore Boschini**

*'In the sky of his life in the Spirit three special lights shone out: the Christ of mercy, the Immaculate Virgin, and St. Camillus. The special devotion of Brother Ettore to the merciful Christ, promoted by St. Faustine and authenticated by specific words of John Paul II, helps us to understand an aspect of his spirituality with greater accuracy. In his initiatives of charity he sought not only to safeguard the dignity of people but also to promote their salvation, calling upon divine mercy. Philanthropy thus became charity not only because it was supernaturally promoted but also because it was directed at the totality of the person.*

*In his love for the merciful Christ there was also that repairing dimension that can be found in **most mystical souls**, so profoundly united to the Lord as to feel in an acute way a deep concern to repair the offences inflicted on the subject of his love' (from the testimony of Fr. Angelo Brusco).*

### **The Servant of God Aristeia Ceccarelli**

*'The human experience should be received, read and understood only from the perspective of faith: a man who does not have faith knows only limitations, differently from the man who has faith who sees further. Only from a perspective of faith, of convinced adherence to the Crucified Christ, does one understand pain and life. What is greater than God? Lower than a manger? The illuminated love of God for us miserable and base creatures. The humility of a God!...what are our poor souls not to feel? Beloved tears! How much I wish to suffer, to feel pain, so much by the grace of God, and only and solely and purely His love. God, God alone and with Him we will love in a measureless way our Neighbour. An unceasing 'yes', God will give us the strength, the opportunity, the means. **We need to be in love, we need to experience the love of the Crucified Christ, of his infinite mercy, to understand our vocation to compassion and holiness**' (from *Scritti e Memorie*).*

*'We have come to believe in God's love: in these words the Christian can express the fundamental decision of his life. Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction...Since God has first loved us, love is now no longer a mere "command"; it is the response to the gift of love with which God draws near to us' (Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas est. Encyclical Letter on Christian Love*, n. 1).*

*'Everyone who stops beside the suffering of another person, whatever form it may take, is a Good Samaritan...who "is moved" by the misfortune of another...bringing help to the injured man... A Good Samaritan is the person capable of exactly such a gift of self' (John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris. Apostolic Letter on the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering*, n. 28).*

To think about the life of St. Camillus is to perceive in his biography a cocktail of biographical circumstances and aspects of his temperament that have characterised other people who were impassioned about man because they were fascinated by God and 'pierced' by His mercy. Does not his tearaway and bizarre youth perhaps remind us of Francis of Assisi? And does not his passion for gambling remind us of that equally fierce passion of Blaise Pascal? Was not his military origins as a soldier the same as those of Ignatius of Loyola? Is not the clarity of a single purpose pursued with obstinate determination for the whole of his life (the sick) on a par with the equally monothematic clarity of Don Bosco for the young? Was not his pitying deep concern for the most abandoned suffering people the same as what motivated Vincent de Paul and more recently Cottolengo or Teresa of Calcutta?

All of them '*stand out as lasting models of social charity for all people of good will*' (*Deus caritas est*, n. 40) but this was because beforehand they were themselves fascinated and benefited by that '*Deus impassibilis, sed non incompassibilis*, the God of *con-solatio*' (*Spe salvi*, n. 39) who reveals how the capacity to suffer (*miser cordia* (mercy) = *miseri-cordis*) for the truth of man is the incontrovertible yardstick of humanity itself (compassion = *cum-patere*), becoming therefore *ministers* (servants, dispensers...) of *charity* because first they were the subjects of mercy (experienced first of all in the first person and then poured with great fortitude, as compassion, as a relieving balsam, on the wounds and the needs of other people).

They told Camillus that a distinguished prelate was waiting for him impatiently. He was putting food into the mouth of a sick man. He replied, without even turning round: 'Tell His Excellency that I am busy with Jesus Christ at the moment. As soon as I have finished, I will present myself'.

And when Pope Clement VIII at the beginning of his pontificate came to visit the Hospital of the Holy Spirit, Camillus knelt down to kiss his feet with his giant's body in his usual work clothes which also had 'two small urinals' hanging from the belt.

*The fairs of charity*: "Stop! Where are you going? There is the plague in Milan!" It was in this way that some peasants of the countryside of Pavia, in the winter, of 1594, tried to stop a group of men who were riding towards the Duchy of Milan. After learning that the plague had broken out, Camillus brought together half a dozen of his companions in Genoa and left at a gallop to being help. "That is exactly why we are going!" he answered without stopping. These are attested facts that have a place and a date. But they are also emblematic episodes: this is the story of a man who carried men forward by his example, of a saint-

man who launched in his world and his epoch a campaign to relieve suffering, care for illness and reach the outskirts of marginalisation.

The answer that Camillus gave to the anthropological challenge that was providentially posed to him by his historical context and moment was captured in three practices: *of the hands* (*complete service to the sick*); of the *feet* (*adventurous journeys throughout the peninsula of Italy*); and of the *knees* (*assiduous prayer and a solid spiritual life*). At the centre of everything was the figure of the sick person, in his or her totality (body and soul, physical illnesses to cure, and various miseries to be accompanied, integrated and forgiven).

In the teaching of Camillus de Lellis, care for the sick unfolded both with a *supernatural* profile – seeing in the sick person the person of suffering Christ (Mt 25) – and through what was quintessentially *human*, adopting the approach of a very tender mother towards her own sick son (the Samaritan in Lk 10:29ss). These two dimensions cannot be separated and they start from a single outlook of faith: specifically because in a sick poor person Camillus saw Christ himself, he enveloped him or her in motherly tenderness. His challenge was ‘mad’, almost utopian, that of an impossible love. His was a wager of the heart. One can say that his great obstinacy was to ‘place his heart in a state of grace’.

The recommendation he gave to his sons was to have “more heart in those hands, I want to see more heart”. When observing him in a hospital ward (at the Hospital of the Holy Spirit in Rome or the *Cà Granda* Hospital of Milan), preferably on his knees in front of his ‘lords and masters’, people had the impression of a stupefying liturgy of mercy.

Saints never have abstract ideas. Rather, they have force-ideas, motivational wedges, which have an explosive effect on the improvement of the societies of their time and of humanity. These were perennially valid ideas because they sprang from the perennial newness of the Gospel. St. Camillus passed without hesitating from insight to implementation: ‘Each religious should be careful not to be a reformer or a head or a corrector for hospitals, but more quickly he should strive to teach by **works** more than by **words**’. In Camillus, **truth** (the ideal) took **practical shape** (works) in conformity with this great coherence.

Sick people, before anything else, expect to read the new departures in medicine and care in the faces, in the approaches and in the professional actions of health-care workers who work in institutions at all levels. Camillus would still say today that ‘new methods must be adopted’, in which there is in the frailty of man, as well, a reflection of the *methods* with which Jesus, the physician of bodies and souls, cured the sick who gathered around him. Or at least the look and the tenderness of a mother.

Faced with such an exemplary programme, given the parameters of the difficult situations that are encountered, the risk of discouragement, and the temptation of disengagement, the **courage to dare** is as necessary as ever before in order to be able to reactivate energies not only to achieve more incisive individual action but also to secure a shared exercise of mercy that is intelligent, planned, constant and generous!

### ***IDENTITY-CHARISM-CAMILLIAN SPIRITUALITY: BETWEEN THE PAST, THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE***

It is possible to reinterpret what Camillus experienced in a personal and original sense only by decentring attention from ourselves – this is the leap of quality that Jesus asked of the expert in law (Lk 10:29ss.), completely overturning his perspective. The expert in the law had asked Jesus, with a certain presumption, “who is **my** neighbour?” and Jesus in the end asked him: “who of these three was a neighbour to the unfortunate man?”, as if to say that it is not others who are near to me, but, rather, that **I** must take the initiative to draw near to others. This is a matter of understanding that it is not the universe that revolves around me as though everything was at my service but, rather, that **I** have to revolve around other people, stopping when this is necessary, to allow myself to be provoked and matured by their needs!

Now the commandment to love God and one’s neighbour is no longer an impossible law – it is good news, a gift for everyone: those whom the Samaritan took care of are now enabled to follow the same pathway. The evangelist Luke does not say that the two commandments are similar or that they can be fused into one. Instead, he overturns things: he leads us to see and to welcome God’s love for us which enables us to love other people. In the narrative, one figure dissolves into another; there is almost a progressive

superimposition: the expert in the law, together with the priest and the Levite, is called to identify himself with the half-dead man who is cared for by the Samaritan, and then disappears over the horizon toward Jerusalem, where he will place upon himself his own evil. In the meantime, the man gets well thanks to the welcome and *com-passion* of the Samaritan and the recently healed man, in his turn, will also be able to welcome and take care of all of the half-dead people that he meets: he will also become a *Good Samaritan* – this is our specific vocation.

This unification of all in a single person is the wonder of love: lover and beloved – *the subject and object of compassion* – make up a single flesh. God has come near you and has become the struck and wounded man that you were, so that you, now healed, become a Samaritan towards he who, in the meantime, has come to need you. At this point, he is you and you are he. And you, loving the last, directly love him, the first, who became the last of all to serve everyone, and thus everyone needs everyone. This is the Messianism that is brought by Jesus: not the dream of a socio-political-religious success of some kind but, rather, the pathway of those who attend to the evil and the frailty of the world which will certainly exist until the end of time. This is the frail house of God and of man which is born wherever a person is ready to welcome others – even when they are different – with deeds that have the upsetting and disarming force of daily life: *he came near to him, he saw, he was moved, he drew near, he bandaged his wounds, he put him on his ass, he took him, he took care of him, he took out money and invited the innkeeper to be associated with his work of care, and on his return he would refund any further expenses* (the ministry of presence in absence).

This is the vocabulary of mercy; it is the lexicon of love; it is the glossary of peace; it is the code of the believer; it is the booklet of instructions by which to live with dignity; it is the passport not so much to heaven as to be men, for our journey towards ourselves, for our pilgrimage towards a discovery of what matters in life.

Camillus knew how to live the great dynamic of *Samaritan compassion* because he first welcomed the purifying and exalting experience of *divine mercy*, in a lucid awareness of his identity as a ‘prodigal son’ who was welcomed by God and reconciled with himself.

Forgiveness, like that given by the Father to his two sons, in Camillus had the effect of healing and freedom: all forgiveness, like every Love, of which forgiveness is a particular form, has its origins in God who loved us and forgave us first.

From that moment onwards, every act of compassion towards the sick was not for Camillus de Lellis a request to carry out some obligation, but, rather, a response to the forgiveness that he had received from God and directly experienced personally. Camillus learnt to see in Jesus the merciful face of the Father, specifically when looking at the crucified Jesus who asks for forgiveness, who gives himself and consumes himself completely: he learnt as a reconciled son to discover an embroidery of love for himself and for other sinners, trying to become specifically like the Father.

In then becoming the Father according to the charism of Merciful Love, Camillus refined his triple capacity for *com-prehension* (the capacity to expand the mind in such a way as not to judge the history of anyone); for *com-passion* (the capacity to expand the heart); and for *com-mozione* (‘being moved’; the capacity to move towards brothers and sisters in need).

How much tenderness! The Father interrupted the younger son while he was confessing his faults: “I am no longer worthy of being called your son”. This is a phrase that the heart of this father cannot bear and he hurries to restore to his son the signs of his dignity – fine clothes, a ring, sandals. The welcoming of the son who has come back is described in a moving way: ‘when he was still far off, his father saw him, he felt compassion, he ran to him, and grasped him around the neck and he kissed him’. The mercy of the father is overflowing, unconditional and is expressed even before the son begins to speak. This Camillus experienced personally and from that moment onwards he learnt to do the same: foresee the needs of others, not judge, restore dignity, improve the lives of the poor without seeking anything in exchange...

## ***1. IDENTITY***

### ***1.1. The charism of Camillus and the Camillians***

A *charism* is initially given by God to a founder but it then grows deeper, it develops and it is renewed during the life of the Institute that he or she founds. The formulation that has been given to our charism during the course of over four centuries of history of our Order has remained almost the same: *it is the charism of mercy towards the sick* (*Formula di vita* of 1599). An insuperable model for this is Christ himself who dedicated a large part of his public activity to receiving the sick and to healing (in the dual sense of *healing and saving*) their infirmities – as a manifest testimony to the presence of the Kingdom of God in history. He also commanded his disciples to do the same, uniting to the mission of proclaiming the Gospel the task of healing the sick, arguing that what was done in service to the poor and suffering (Mt 25) would be done to him.

There is a great deal of concordant testimony collected in the *Positio super virtutum* of the process of canonisation of Camillus that demonstrates in great detail, as though one had before one an immense mosaic, what we could call *spirituality underway*. Before the eyes of the reader flow the most beautiful slides of concrete, diligent, creative, surprising, tireless, compelling and heroic charity.

A contemplation of Camillus, who was a nurse and a priest; the founder and leader of an authentic taskforce for emergencies; a mystic and the organiser of aid...necessarily refers back to a spirituality that was lived with very deep roots. He was active and contemplative, he saw Christ in the sick person and the sick person in Christ; he wanted the integral good of poor and sick people and he thus lived to the full the value of the 'sacrament' of the *glass of water* (Mt 10:42); his contemplation became industrious and his charity was nourished by contemplation.

The ecclesiastical tribunal that examined the cause for the canonisation of Camillus did not disdain to use an anecdote which illustrated the dynamic of charity that had animated our saint. One day at *Porta del Popolo* Camillus came across eight vagrants who were half-dead with hunger and cold. He convinced them to go with him to the hospital. One of them fainted and collapsed along the way. A luxurious carriage passed by with gentlemen travelling inside it. Camillus stopped it and asked them to find some space for the unfortunate man. Those gentlemen got down from their carriage and gave it to Camillus who then put the whole group of vagrants inside it.

He also knew how to become aggressive towards people who held the purse strings and did not give him flour for bread even in return for payment. The prefect of the public grain store told him that the corn that was kept there was already spoken for and that he could not meet his request. Camillus shouted at him: "If because of this lack my poor suffer or die of hunger I will protest about it before God and I will cite it before His terrible tribunal to which you will have to give a most rigid account of yourselves". This Monsignor, who was frightened, ordered him to be given what he had been asked for'.

The charism of mercy towards the sick has taken specific form both through how Camillus understood it and how we understand it at the present time (both of these forms have been ratified by the Church). Here we are dealing with two approaches: as *complete service to the sick person* and as a 'school of charity' for those who share the task of caring for the sick.

### **1.2. Complete service to the sick person**

The sick people who turned to Jesus, or were taken to him, expected physical healing. But what they received from him was much more than this (*health and salvation*): in addition to being cured in their bodies, they felt welcomed and understood (the woman with an issue of blood, the lepers, the blind man Bartimaeus), they were also healed as regards their interior wounds of sin (the man with dropsy), illumined in their faith, reintegrated into the communities that had marginalised them, and keen to bear witness to others of their meeting with Christ.

Camillus, in renewing the practice of pastoral care of his epoch, achieved a complete service to the person a sick man or woman, with care being paid to both their material and their spiritual needs: 'If someone inspired by the Lord God wants to exercise corporal and spiritual mercy according to our Institute...he should know that he has to live...at the service of the sick poor, even if plague-stricken, as regards their corporal and spiritual needs' (*Formula di vita*). To achieve this overall approach to the persons of suffering men and women he enrolled in his company lay people and priests, nurses, theologians and

musicians, Neapolitan aristocratic ladies and Roman prelates, scholars and the illiterate – each one of them offered their own specific contribution to the wellbeing of the sick.

Always following the furrow of the wish to give completeness to the exercise of mercy towards the sick, Camillus made clear that the charism of the Institute did not end with taking care of the sick in hospitals (what he called the ‘Mediterranean Sea’) but also involved accompanying and caring for the dying, especially in private homes (the ‘ocean sea’ which practically had no boundaries). He thus gave a great deal of importance to this aspect of the so-termed ‘commending of dying souls’ and in some important texts which define our charism it is clearly laid down that the task of the Institute was to ‘serve the sick poor in hospitals in spiritual and corporal matters and also to commend the souls of the dying in the city’ (letter to the chapter of the Major Hospital of Milan, 1594). The same point is made three times in the *Testament* of Camillus: ‘Furthermore I wish that spiritual assistance should never be attended to without corporal assistance’. When he was still alive, Camillus testified to the fact that in many cities in Italy the Camillians were already known as the ‘Fathers of good dying’.

### **1.3. School of charity**

The gift that was received by Camillus and transmitted to his sons does not end in witness to the mercy of Christ towards the sick and the dying. The founder was always careful to teach others (nurses in hospitals, his first companions, the novices who gradually joined him) how to improve their presence at the side of suffering people. Through the witness of his example first and foremost, but also through words which at times reached rebuke, he never ceased to teach and to exhort everyone to engage in the service of care ‘with all perfection’.

He himself was taught by his personal experience of illness, by the interior voice of the Spirit which guided him, and by listening to the needs of sick people. Camillus initiated an authentic school of nursing, with precise rules about how to provide care and a detailed set of tasks (see for example *Ordini et modi che si hanno da tenere negli hospitali in servire li poveri infermi*, 1584), proposing a kind of teaching that we today define as ‘integrated’, which contains knowledge and how to do things (scientific knowledge and technical abilities) so as to then know how to be and do: *uniting hands that provide care with hearts that love*, technology with love, and professional expertise with an outlook of faith.

The Church has recognised that this exemplariness and expertise in serving the sick and teaching others to serve them in a better way is a part of the Camillian charism. Pope Benedict XVI, when declaring Camillus a saint in 1746, defined him as the ‘initiator of a new school of charity’ (cf. the Bull *Misericordiae studium*).

With this specific and solemn call of the Magisterium of the Church, the dynamic of our Camillian consecrated lives is more closely connected with the broader context of the Christian tradition which has always recognised in the exercise of corporal and spiritual works of mercy the most qualified practical gospel profile for the identity, the development and the maturity of every baptised person: ‘The Church...in all ages...presents herself to the world, with love as her characteristic mark...This explains the number and the variety of institutions dedicated to the works of mercy’ (Const., art. 7).

Camillus, ‘himself the recipient of mercy’ (Const., art. 8), was provoked, supported and directed by valuable and providential *mediators of mercy* (Antonio di Nicasastro, friar Angelo, ...) who traversed his life to the utmost with authentic works of mercy (offers of food, shelter and work; offers of wise advice during doubt...), establishing in his person a *memory of mercy* which subsequently was to be a source of compassion towards other people, above all the sick and the needy poor, and animated him at a deep level ‘to teach others how to serve them’ (Const., art. 8).

‘Therefore, the charism which has been granted us in a special way to our Order and which establishes its character and mandate, is expressed and realised in the works of mercy towards the sick’ (Const., art. 10-42) and ‘through the ministry of mercy towards the sick, professed by a vow’ (Const., art. 12).

## **2. THE SPIRITUALITY THAT BUBBLES UP FROM THE CHARISM**

To speak about ‘Camillian spirituality’ is possible because Camillus was the first to experience a very intense spiritual experience and in this way he remains for us in this, as well, a founder and a model to follow. The specificity of the Camillian charism is love for the sick lived in community. From this gift comes the way that we live our Camillian spirituality.

The dictates of our Constitution point out to us the profound gospel foundation on which the spirituality which bubbles up from our charism is based: *the presence of Christ in us serving the sick and the presence of Christ in the sick that we serve.*

These are the two coordinates of our spiritual journey. We can say that the whole of our Constitution, distilled from the experience of our Founder, is pervaded by a dual conviction: on the one hand, we identify with the merciful Christ and we become Good Samaritans for the human person when he or she has most need of help; on the other, we recognise the crucified Christ in a person who is suffering. In other words, we want *to be Jesus for the sick and serve Jesus in the sick.*

### **2.1. The discovery of God**

*Before his conversion (which took place on 2 February 1575) Camillus was not...a Camillian.* Although he had been baptised and raised as a Christian, above all by his mother, he lived as though God did not exist, being concerned with other thoughts and human affairs. He had remembered God and called on him on a number of occasions, especially during the moments of greatest danger of his adventurous military life, but nothing else: God was a memory from his childhood and of the catechism that he had learnt by heart. As a consequence, his Christian life left much to be desired. The people that he met could be companions in arms; enemies to be fought and killed; fellows for gambling at cards or dice; friends with whom to enjoy short breaks between one military campaign and another; annoying neighbours in beds at St. James’ Hospital; friars from whom to beg a job or a piece of bread...everything except ‘neighbours’ to be loved. During the course of his previous admissions to hospital, to which he had been forced by the sore on his foot, he had met many sick people, but like the priest and the Levite of the parable of the Good Samaritan of Jesus he had passed by without taking care of them, ill-treating them when he had been obliged to serve them to earn money for his medical expenses.

But one day, at the age of twenty-five and aware that his life was a failure, Camillus discovered God. He met Him when reflecting on the misery of his condition, thinking anew about the spiritual exhortations of the good Father Angelo and guided by a strong interior light: ‘why have I been hitherto so blind as not to know and serve my Lord?’ A *personal relationship* with God was born. Camillus experienced the mercy of God, he asked Him for forgiveness and he thanked Him for having waited for him for such a long time. He then decided to consecrate to Him the rest of his life amongst the Capuchins. Later the will of God led him once again to enter a hospital but this time with his heart transformed and inflamed by love for God. With his relationship with God changed, his relationship with man also changed: every sick person was now a brother to be loved for God; a suffering and dying Christ to take care of and to comfort.

After him, anybody ‘inspired by the Lord God’ who wanted to follow him in this complete service to the suffering, would do this ‘out of true love for God’, ‘to please the will of God’, ‘for the glory of God’ (*Formula di vita*).

### **2.2. The crucified Jesus**

*There is no authentic experience of God that does not arise from solitude and does not grow in the difficulties of trial and testing.* It is clear that we Camillians, and as a consequence our spirituality, come ‘from the desert’. Illness, suffering and tribulations made Camillus increasingly feel not only his proverbial devotion to the crucified Christ: they also gave an important spiritual impress to his life. Experience of illness and suffering became for Camillus a theological setting in which there rang out God’s appeal to acts of faith, to allowing oneself to be led along that way of blessedness that is reserved to those who believe without having seen (Jn 20:29) and, perhaps, without even understanding. It must have been like that for Camillus during those beginnings, which were uncertain and afflicted with difficulties, with the *grave*

*tribulation* provoked in him by the opposition of Filippo Neri, his spiritual director, to his project of a foundation.

The crucified Christ is the unifying element of Camillian spirituality. He is at one and the same time the servant who gives his life and he who is served in those with whom he identifies in a special way; he is the 'setting' where one learns to die to live and to live to die; he is the utmost 'sign' of the acceptance of unconditional mercy by men in need who, in this way, can enter the truth of themselves. The cross is the great symbol of mercy which bubbles up in an overflowing way from the love that dwells in us. Lastly, it is the ultimate 'proof' of merciful love: to suffer for those who love one to the point of 'sacrificing' one's life in the slow fire of daily service.

The not brief contact that Camillus had with Capuchin life and spirituality left in him a profound devotion to the crucified Christ, something which was, for that matter, characteristic of the epoch he lived in. This was a devotion that was expressed, for example, in prolonged prayer, which at times was done 'with his arms spread out above all towards the feet of the Most Holy Crucified Christ to whose image he was very greatly devoted'. The whole of his interior life was pervaded with this and so 'in his prayers he did not go for certain points that were overly subtle or speculative; but enveloping himself totally in the Most Holy Rib of the Crucified Christ he stayed there, he there asked for graces, he there discovered his needs and he there engaged in high divine conversations with his beloved Lord'.

The tears of Camillus in front of the cross lead us back to a fundamental coordinate of his believing approach in front of the mystery of God: *only by 'remaining' in front of crucified love was Camillus able to 'discover his needs'*. In front of the cross, Camillus discovered that he was first and foremost a man *in need of mercy*. Not only that mercy that God could bestow upon him to draw him away from his past life, but also (and principally) that mercy that Camillus himself was called to have towards himself from the moment that he discovered that he was loved integrally by divine mercy. Only starting with the absolute and incomprehensible gratuitous of crucified love did he learn to have mercy towards himself, towards his own limitations, towards that humanity that was waiting to be encountered and respected and which was now called to be transformed and transfigured into an image of the crucified Christ.

For that matter he did not give himself any other possibility! Only by 'remaining and enveloping himself' in the passion of the love revealed on the crucifix, was it possible for him to understand in a serene way the less lovable side of himself and to acknowledge it, without feeling that this was an offence to his own personal esteem. Only in this way is one regenerated by the experience of mercy and does one become mercy, defeating that fear of loving with all of one's heart which is specific to pusillanimity. The freedom to engage in a total giving of oneself commences at the moment that one re-appropriates oneself; here is revealed the pathway of the vocation to holiness which passes by way of vulnerability, limitation and need. Only then, and this was the case with Camillus, does it become possible to discover – and does one wish to discover – the 'needs of God'; only then does one know how to distinguish them from one's own needs and does one learn to perceive there the call to conversion and, at the outer rings, the steady emergence of a charism that radically redefines one's existence.

On various occasions Camillus testified that the foundation of the Institute was not his work 'but that of the Crucified Christ and the wound on my foot'. Camillus confided to the crucified Christ his doubts and difficulties when he created his first group of companions at St. James' Hospital and every time that he encountered obstacles and was tempted to give up. The accounts of the apparitions of Christ on the crucifix offer us some important elements by which to identify the point of departure of the experience of Camillus. In particular their message – "What's afflicting you pusillanimous one? Carry on the undertaking for I will help you, as this is my work and not yours" – places emphasis on pusillanimity, on faith that is still experienced with the heart of a child, a spirit that is still too narrow, weak and vulnerable to resist the force of the power of the Spirit and the demanding trial of the gratuitousness of giving. The words of Christ on the crucifix were words that made him the 'happiest and most comforted man in the world'. And it was also necessary that at the outset there was the experience of a great love, a limitless mercy that purified and recreated so that his heart could once again beat according to the heartbeats of God, and could continue to do this even when God seemed to be hidden and to have abandoned him.

The characteristic of the *provisional* emerges in Camillus' experience of the cross. For this saint, who was wandering in the darkness of a will of God that was still obscure to him, the cross of Jesus was

experienced at that moment as a comfort, the source of positive affection and imbued with trust and hope; a glimmer of certainty in the uncertainty of the mystery of God; testimony to the presence of He who does not forget about man...in a situation that appeared somewhat a distancing; at the least, the silence of a heaven that did not speak. Here Camillus was faced, if we may so express ourselves, with the fundamental word of the cross, the action of God who comes to man and looks for him. Although He communicated Himself to a 'heart that was still too small' (pusillanimous), God decided for Camillus; He drew near to him in the only way that He knows – as mercy.

Twice Christ on the crucifix, speaking to him in a vision (or in a dream), encouraged him to continue with the work that he had undertaken. In his *Formula* for the life of his religious, he made clear that those who wanted to join him had to know that they had to live 'only for the Crucified Jesus' and should think that it was a 'great reward to die for the Crucified Jesus Christ'. It was the crucified Christ whom he contemplated with ecstasy in the suffering faces of his sick people. On his deathbed he contemplated for a long time the crucified Christ whom he had had painted so as to always have him before his eyes. Lastly, in his spiritual testament he entrusted to the Crucified Jesus Christ the whole of himself – body and soul.

### **3. IN THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL: CHARITY**

#### **3.1. Being Jesus for the sick**

To live as Christians is to follow Jesus and to bear a cross as he did – our own cross and that of our crucified brethren whom we meet, in order to share with him and with them in the resurrection. If we do not like speaking about the cross, because it seems to be something that is negative and out of fashion, let us call it by its real name, as Camillus did: it is the Crucified Christ who continues still today his passion in us and above all in those who suffer, and completes the redemption of humanity.

The source of love (and thus also of merciful love towards the sick) is God. He expressed the fullness of His love for us in the person and the work of Jesus who loved us unto the total giving of himself and summarised his teaching in the commandment of love. We can implement this because the love itself of God is shared with us in the gift of the Holy Spirit.

In feeling called by God to bear witness to the merciful love of Christ for the sick, Camillus was aware that he had gone to the very heart of the Gospel – the commandment of love. In enthusiastic tones, he observed to his religious brothers that those who had dedicated themselves to serving their brethren had chosen 'the large dish' of the Gospel, that is to say the best part, that part which was dearest to Jesus; and that in living according to the charism one could 'acquire the precious marguerite of charity', to possess which it was worthwhile leaving everything else. According to his biographer, Cicatelli, Camillus 'never spoke about anything else, nor more often, nor with greater fervour, than this holy charity and he wanted to imprint it on the hearts of all men'. Charity towards the sick, he said, must clothe itself anew with the characteristics of diligence, lovingness, pleasantness and respect (cf. *Ordini et modi*) and should be lived 'with all perfection' and without limitations, even to the point of risking one's own life, in line with the teaching of the Gospel: 'No greater love has a man than that he lays down his life for his friends' (Jn 15:13), because 'this is what transforms us into God and purifies us of every stain of sin' (*Formula di vita*). For this reason, charity should be given pride of place, even before acts of worship and practices of piety, because it is through its exercise that its 'highest perfection' is achieved.

As regards the relationship between charity towards one's neighbour and the union with God that is searched for in prayer, Camillus' thinking was very explicit. When he saw that some of his religious brothers who were in a hospital preferred to dedicate themselves to prayer rather than to service to the patients ('with the pretext that they did not want to be distracted from interior union'), this was something that he regretted because 'he did not like that kind of union that removed arms from charity'. In addition, since in heaven we will have a great deal of time to dedicate to the contemplation of God, in the present we have to 'leave God for God' in order to do good to the poor (*Vita manoscritta*).

Just as in the history of the Church very many martyrs are remembered who gave their lives to bear witness to their faith in Christ, so we can say that during the last four centuries of the incarnation of the

Camillian charism many men and women have been ‘martyrs to charity’ by giving their lives for Christ who was recognised and served in the sick. It is martyrdom that is perhaps most held dear by Jesus because love for neighbour to the point of giving one’s own life is the most characteristic mark of Christians (‘By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another’, Jn 13:35) and locates us directly at the roots of the Gospel.

### **3.2. Recognising and serving Jesus in sick people**

In carrying out this service which is so demanding and radical in character, Camillus was guided by the Spirit to implement the two key approaches of evangelical charity: recognising and serving Christ in one’s suffering neighbour, on the one hand, and being an expression of the merciful Christ who takes care of the suffering, on the other.

The first two sentences of the Gospel quoted in the *Formula di vita* are taken from chapter 25 of the Gospel according to St. Matthew: ‘whatever you did to the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did to me’; ‘I was sick and you visited me. Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you’. It was specifically to implement these words of the Gospel that Camillus and his sons and daughters have felt they are called by God.

Through the force of the charism that he had received, the mind, the heart and even the senses of Camillus were completely transformed: he truly perceived the suffering Christ in the sick people that he encountered and this to the point of calling them ‘my Lords and Masters’. And he taught: ‘with all possible diligence each one should be careful not to ill-treat the sick poor, that is to say with rude words or other such attitudes, but he should treat them rather with meekness and charity, remembering the words of the Lord “whatever you did to the least of my brothers and sisters you did to me”, and thus everyone should see the poor as the person of the Lord’ (*Regola XXXIX, in Ordini et modi*). After finishing the liturgy in front of the altar, he continued the adoration at the bedsides of sick people. ‘He saw so strongly the person of Christ in them that often when putting food into their mouths, imagining that they were his Christs, in a low voice he asked for graces and forgiveness for his sins, being in this way so reverent in their presence as though he was truly in the presence of Christ, feeding them very often without a hat on his head and being on his knees... When he took one of them in his arms to change his sheets, he did this with so much affection and diligence that it appeared that he was handling the very person of Jesus Christ. And even if the sick person was the most contagious or leprous of the hospital, nonetheless he took him before his eyes face to face, placing his face before his head as though it was the holy head of the Lord... Many times when going away he kissed their hands or heads or feet or sores as though they were the sores of Jesus Christ’ (*Vita manoscritta, 228s*).

Camillus, like so many other saints and mystics, went into ecstasy, but with him this happened when he was in front of the sick: serving them – as some of his religious brothers testified – ‘completely laughing, abstracted and transformed in ecstasy’ because in the faces of those sick poor people ‘he saw nothing else but the very face of his Lord’ (*Vita manoscritta, 376*).

## **4. THE FUTURE OF CAMILLIAN MISSION AND ACTION: ON A JOURNEY TOGETHER ON SIX HIGH ROADS**

‘Love without competence is like a heart without arms!’ is a phrase that is attributed to Fr. Calisto Vendrame, a former Superior General of the Order. It is starting with this healthy warning and after learning a little about the foundations of Camillian mercy with its three great arches – *Camillus de Lellis* from whom everything began; the *charism*, that is to say the providential suggestion (where the initiative of God encountered the free readiness to help of man) of the outset but which has always remained fertile and productive down history; and *spirituality*, that is to say the terrain of culture that allows the source of inspiration to be alive and maintained permanently active and adapted to history – that we can address what later happened in history, in the style of Jesus with his disciples who after being with him in his home, after

seeing ‘where he lived’ (‘Come and See’), were invited to dive back into the flow of life but with a renewed identity that had to inform their choices, their works and their relationships. We thus come to this subject not in order to say farewell to our fertile roots but, rather, to enter the world of man, to live what we have gathered in ‘our Camillian home’.

*Mission* is the great goal, the great framework of our working together, the atmosphere that should be breathed in; *values* are the points of departure, the founding pillars, but also the guardrail that prevents a ruinous going off the rails during the journey.

How, therefore, can we harmonise values (departure) and mission (arrival)? Through the six high roads that we have to travel down to live our Camillian identity and to respond in an ever better way to the challenges of the world of health and health care.

The names of these roads do not belong only to us (given that mission and values are not exclusive to Christians but, rather, *include* the whole of humanity). We share them with other men and women of good will. Some of these roads are blocked with traffic, others involve a quick pace, and others constitute agreements that facilitate movement. Each one of these high roads has a biblical reference because it symbolises a specific mission to be carried out in the field of health and health care.

An uncomfortable and dusty road is *mission*: it goes from *Jerusalem to Gaza*; it is the journey on which the apostle Philip met the Ethiopian and helped him to learn about, and discover, Christ (Acts 8:26-39). The Ethiopian is the symbol of the poor and the sick of all cultural ethnic origins whom we encounter on our mission in so-called developing countries. In the document of the General Chapter of 1989 entitled ‘Towards the Poor and the Third World’, it was explicitly stated that ‘in developing countries our cooperation is addressed to provoking in an incisive way the joint participation of the populations and thus of the poor in activities directed towards their advancement; to fostering health-care education and the prevention of illness; to promoting social justice in all its legislative and practical applications; and to bearing witness to our involvement through solidarity and sharing. Our efforts will be effective if we manage to make poor people aware of their situation and make them the protagonists of their own emancipation and liberation’. These words, by now written some twenty years ago, with their explicit reference to the so-called ‘mission’ countries, have now become a clear appeal to our multicultural and multi-religious western societies – which have features of cultural, health-care, moral and relational poverty which are increasingly evident and impelling – to engage in intelligent and coherent action.

The second road, which is somewhat confused and chaotic, is that of *humanisation*, and this is called *Jerusalem-Jericho*: this is the way followed by the Good Samaritan who bent down and attended to the wounds of the unfortunate man (Lk 10:30-37). Today one perceives the urgent need to humanise the world of health care at all levels, retrieving ‘heart in the hands’ at the service of the sick. The first step in humanising is humanising oneself. Humanity is transmitted through welcome, deeds, healing approaches...at times through a simple smile: ‘those who do not smile’, said Don Oriano, ‘are not serious people’. Secondly, one humanises by placing the sick person at the centre of service. Often the sick person is replaced with other priorities and interests to do with ideology, politics, giving jobs to one’s own people, trade unions, or an exaggerated desire for efficiency. To humanise means to educate (*ex-ducere*, that is to say bringing out what each person already has rather than throwing in something *ex-novo*) in relating to sick people not as objects of treatment but as protagonists of their own processes of healing, involving them in shouldering their responsibilities and reawakening their ‘interior physician’.

The third road is called *evangelisation*: this is the road that goes from *Jerusalem to Bethany* (Lk 10:38-42 – Martha and Mary). In this village Jesus met Martha and Mary, in their home, transforming the meeting into a moment of evangelisation. In his encyclical *Evangelii nuntiandi* Paul VI recognised that the greatest challenge for the Church is to place the Gospel in culture, living all of the urgent need for a new *evangelisation*. Today in the health-care world the Gospel is proclaimed in a privileged way through dialogue and relationships of help with patients, above all understanding and respecting their various ways of responding to the crisis of illness. Illness is a ‘time for wanting’: it forces man to stop, to look inside himself and to ask himself questions, and it can become an instrument for an interior transformation. Sick people themselves can evangelise through their pain and their witness. In the past the healthy spoke to the sick in order to exhort them; today it is the sick – if they are allowed to do this! – who speak to the healthy in order to illuminate them. Evangelisation is further achieved through the formation of a new vision of

health which is conceived not as the absence of illness but, rather, as the capacity of the individual to express her or his physical, mental and spiritual potentialities, within the context of the limitations produced by illness as well. It is, in essential terms, rediscovering and promoting the anthropology of the person, in his or her totality, dignity and sacredness, being committed to bearing witness to the heritage of human and Christian values, in particular in the light of the complex ethical challenges posed by contemporary science at the critical moments of birth and death.

The fourth road is an inside track called *formation*. It is represented by the itinerary of *Jerusalem to Emmaus* (Lk 24:13-25), along which Jesus made himself a travelling companion of his discouraged and dismayed disciples in order to enlighten them with the catechesis, to animate them, and to make them witnesses to hope. Today one can notice an increasing awareness of the need for professionalism and competence. One cannot improvise an increasingly human and humanising presence: the mind is like a parachute, it only works when it opens! Formation, courses, meetings...act to stimulate new motivations and insights and to reduce approximation, repetitiveness and being worn out which can undermine personal and professional creativity, reactivating, instead, a more dynamic animation in order to achieve a more competent service at the side of patients.

The fifth road, which has a great deal of traffic, is called *cooperation* and it is symbolised by the journey from *Jerusalem to Capharnaum* (Mk 2:1-5). In this town, the initiative of four volunteers who brought a paralysed man to Jesus by lowering him through a roof contributed to a project of salvation and healing. Their communal efforts invoke the urgent need to develop a form of pastoral care, and more in general overall therapeutic action, in order to overcome forms of individualism, the fragmentation of efforts, and sectorial mentalities. The challenge is to work together to serve the world of health and health care in a better way, harmonising and coordinating the charisms and the resources of everyone: patients, families, health-care workers and the Church community, volunteers, and Church and civil institutions and agencies.

The sixth road is called *conversion* and it is represented by the road from *Jerusalem to Damascus* (Acts 9:1-17) on which St. Paul experienced the transformation of his life. This is an itinerary that concerns each one of us from close to hand and which is expressed in a readiness 'to be able, at every moment to sacrifice what we are for what we can be'. On the one hand, it is a personal journey which requires the humility to change in ourselves what needs to be changed; on the other, it is an interaction with the external world which requires the prophetic courage to denounce injustices, to propose values and to bring forth new models. Conversion is also having the courage to reconvert the purpose or identity of certain works, adapting them to new challenges and freeing up resources and people for more prophetic horizons and projects. This prophetic vision often clashes with forms of reticence and fears, as well as with the fear of losing certainties, stability and leading roles.

An aphorism of K. Gibran reminds us that in the images of the home and of the road, and their creative tension, there is the memory of our history and an appeal to new horizons: 'my *home* tells me "do not leave me because your *past* dwells here". And the road tells me: "come and follow me: I am your *future*"!'.

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