

Mary *Salus Infirmorum* and Sorrowful Mother

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Mary, the Mother of Jesus, faithful in her acceptance of the Word and in her cooperation in his work, especially in her concern for the suffering, presents herself to us as a model of the spiritual life and of service to others. She assists us with her maternal love. Our Order venerates her with singular devotion, devoutly celebrates her feasts, and honours her by praying the rosary. We recognize and love her as our Mother and invoke her as “Queen of the Ministers of the Infirm” (C. 68).

The constitution of our Camillian Order, with sobriety makes a synthesis of the Marian dimension that accompanied the permanent inner transformation of St. Camillus and illuminates that dimension of model and service that must characterize in us the exercise of the charism of mercy toward the sick.

Every beginning under the sign of Mary

Camillus' life is a journey of conversion to God and spiritual maturation in the existential dimension of total entrustment to the Mother of the Lord, experienced as the health and salvation of his life, and promoted as such in the context of human suffering. Camillus, after the Crucifix, attributed every grace to the Mother of Jesus: “through Mary Most Holy I have obtained all that graces God has granted me”; “into your hands, O Mary I put every request for graces to God and from you I expect it. Woe to us sinners if we did not have this great Advocate in heaven, she being the Treasurer of all graces that come out of the hands of the Divine Majesty.”

Everything in Camillus' life proceeded according to a providential progression of importance and succession in time so that all his most salient occasions coincided with Marian feasts or solemnities.

On the day of Mary's purification, February 2 of the holy year 1575, Camillus repented from his straying life and converted. For Camillus, his conversion and the purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary was not a fortuitous coincidence: it is a sign that God gave him and that he pointed to Mary, the one who favoured the beginning of his spiritual journey: “purified through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin in the aforementioned bath of his own tears...”, Camillus rose from the ground determined to spend the rest of his life by beginning from “the very day to do bitter penance” among the Capuchins of Manfredonia. Mary's close collaboration with the work of human salvation merited by her Son Christ Jesus - which the liturgy (cf. Lk. 2:22-40) of the day highlighted - was certainly not immediately perceived by Camillus then. With time and the direction his life would take, he would grow, mature, and come to understand the “why” behind that day of salvation.

On the Feast of the Assumption of Mary in 1582, he cultivated the inspiration “to establish a company of pious and good men, who, not for merit, but voluntarily and for the love of God, would serve the sick with that charity and lovingkindness, with which mothers would serve their sick children.” To improve the service to the sick he coordinated a small group of committed people, which immediately aroused jealousy and backbiting. He questioned himself on what to do. It was that great Crucifix kept in the hospital of St. James in Rome, which twice in a mystical vision reassured him, “Of what do you grieve, oh, pusillanimous? Follow the undertaking that I will help you, this being my work and not yours.” Thus began the adventure of the Servants of the Infirm.

After celebrating his first Mass at the altar of Our Lady (June 10, 1584) and accepting as his chaplaincy a shrine dedicated to her - the church of Our Lady of Miracles - on the day of Mary’s nativity, September 8, 1584, Camillus dressed his first companions in the religious habit: “in that way therefore the Congregation was born into the world together with the Most Holy Virgin.” The solemn profession of religious vows was celebrated on the feast of the Immaculate Conception, December 8, 1591.

Camillus’ final entrustment to Mary

The conclusion of Camillus’ life sets the seal on the Marian dimension he acquired. There are two basic elements: a painting, the theme of which he himself indicated, and a passage from his spiritual testament.

Often Camillus repeated to his sick his intimate certainty that “woe to us if we did not have this great Advocate in Heaven,” attributing the gift of eternal health/salvation of so many souls to the only and exclusive merit of the intervention of the Immaculate Mother of the Lord, in whom he placed all his ability and strength of persuasion beside the beds of the sick and dying.

When the season of suffering and death was also announced for him, Camillus acted accordingly: on his deathbed he highlighted the theological root that had always animated him in the search for his own and others’ health/salvation. Among his last acts, “he stood with such fear and trembling of salvation, distrusting himself, he had placed hope in the precious blood of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 1:19; Heb. 13:12; 12:24).

This is revealed in the picture which he specifically got painted and the theme of which he indicated: “a Crucified, with two Angels, one on the right, and the other on the left, with golden chalices in their hands, collecting the blood of the wounds of Jesus. Above the Cross he willed that there should be a God the Father with the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, and two other Angels one on each side, offering to the Eternal Father the chalices of blood in remission of the sins of Camillus. At the foot of the Cross on the right hand, he wanted the Blessed Virgin to be in the act of praying for him, and on the left St. Michael the Archangel, as defender of souls in the last passage. He also wanted these words to be written under the Cross: *Parce famulo tuo quem pretioso sanguine redemisti* (‘Spare your servant, whom you have redeemed with your precious blood’).”

This is the definitive affirmation that the Crucified Christ for Camillus is the Saviour and Redeemer, and that He was always at the center of his progress in faith and in his quest for

total adherence to the plan of salvation that God had prepared for him. Mary, in sorrowful and mute silence pleading for him, is the superlative and unparalleled model of holiness who participates in the healing and sanctifying mission of her Son in a singular and exceptional way. His constant prayer of the last moments of his life was, “Most Holy Mother implore for me graces from your Son, that I may willingly suffer all evil, and if this is not enough, that you send me more,” and having the painting placed in a clearly visible position he continued his meditation.

On the last night he did not sleep, and had his painting given to him. After turning to the Crucifix, he turned to the Blessed Virgin, saying to her, “Eh Merciful Mother, for that constancy which you showed standing under the cross, seeing your most holy Son crucified and dead, impart grace to me. May this soul of mine be saved. Then embracing the picture with great ardour, he kissed the most holy crucifix, kissed the feet of the Mother.” Camillus’ moving last days’ entreaty to the Immaculate Mother of God *Salus Infirmorum* is what the *sensus fidelium* has always felt and experienced: “Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you!” The second element - the passage in the spiritual testament formulated two days before his death - completely sums up Camillus’ Marian dimension. In leaving all of himself - body, spirit, heart - Camillus reserved the best of manhood for Christ and His Mother: “I leave, and I give my soul, and every power of it to my beloved Jesus and His Most Holy Mother...” This free and conscious gesture, posed by Camillus on his deathbed, is the synthesis of the itinerary of faith and love made in harmony with Mary, beginning on that February 2, 1575, and concluded on his deathbed - July 14, 1614 - before the picture of Mary of Sorrows who presents him to the Crucified One, through whose merits he hoped to access the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Camillus unveils the focal point of his Marian dimension in God’s salvific plan: Mary is the creature who has been able to unite herself to the redemptive mystery of her Son, the model who maternally guides God’s people, the sign of sure hope that precedes creatures on their earthly pilgrimage through faith until the day of the Lord comes.

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“There is no greater love than that of a mother for her only sick child,” is for us the highest parameter that can be expressed. The prophet Isaiah uses it to make us understand God’s love for us, “Does a woman forget her child?... As a mother comforts a child so will I comfort you, in Jerusalem you will be comforted...” (Is. 49:15; 66:13).

Camillus prescribed this as a paradigm when he wished to express in synthesis the love that the nascent congregation of the Servants of the Sick was to set as the foundation of its being at the bedside of the sick. This love was also well understood by believers that the Immaculate Mother of God has for the children entrusted to her (Jn. 19:25-27), brothers of her Son “firstborn among many brothers” (Rom. 8:29), invoking her *Salus Infirmorum*. The Second Vatican Council presents her thus, “By her maternal charity, she cares for the brethren of her Son, who still journey on earth surrounded by dangers and cultics, until they are led into the happiness of their true home. Therefore, the Blessed Virgin is invoked by the Church under the titles of Advocate, Auxiliatrix, Adjutrix, and Mediatrix” (*Lumen Gentium*, 62).

We are fully aware of our state of infirmity, and not only at the level of organic or functional or psychophysical dysfunction, but also in the state of moral life that generates deeper sufferings that are not easily removed, because they are inherent in that sphere of existence that belongs to the spiritual dimension of the creature, and which for us believers is called the soul. And the pain of the soul, writes John Paul II, is less amenable to therapy, whose vastness and multiformity of sufferings are certainly no less than the physical (*Salvifici Doloris*, 5).

Today, more than at any other time, the sphere of health and health care, is the crossroads of the great challenges that confront man: evil, life, birth, suffering, healing, death: a place where Man makes the continuous search for equilibrium of relationships with himself, with others, with the world around him, with transcendence; a decisive space of Man's existence that is affected by the strong wind of the secularization of life.

Health care is the terrain where the Christian conception of Man's existence and the secular one clash the most. More than yesterday, for the Church it remains the privileged place of evangelization, the place where the encounter with the infirmus Man is made, the place where the proclamation of the Word of God is lived.

Mary of Sorrows, who stands under the Cross participating in the passion of her Son, is a witness that pain elevated to salvific power by the messianic mission of Christ - delivered by Him to the Church - full of salvific meaning, is a path of faith and growth toward the global health of Man: a synodal path, travelled in tune with and accompanied by Mary, Health of the Sick, contemplating her Son Jesus, present in the history of every man who suffers and dies.