

**Martyrs of Charity
Alexandria, Egypt
249 A.D.-263 A.D.**

249-262, Alexandria, Egypt. In Alexandria, Egypt, a memorial attests to the fact that many saints --- priests, deacons and laity - died between 249 A.D. and 262 A.D. caring for the plague-stricken victims.¹ Historians conjecture that the cause was either a novel influenza virus or hemorrhagic fever. It spread rapidly and reduced the population of the known world by a third. The equivalent number of death today would be 2.5 billion.² (Memorial - 28 February).

The Roman Martyrology records on the twenty-eighth day of February:³
[At Alexandria..]“Likewise the commemoration of the holy priests, deacons, and many others who, in the time of Emperor Valerian, when a most deadly pestilence was raging, willingly faced death while ministering to the sick. The religious faith of the pious is wont to honour them as martyrs.

Martyrs, Who Died in the Great Pestilence in Alexandria (February 28), from the *original* Rev. Alban Butler’s (1883) *Lives of Saints*:⁴

A violent pestilence laid waste the greatest part of the Roman empire during twelve years, from 249 to 263. Five thousand persons died of it in one day in Rome, in 262. St. Dionysius of Alexandria relates, that a cruel sedition and civil war had filled that city with murders and tumults; so that it was safer to travel from the eastern to the western parts of the then known world, than to go from one street of Alexandria to another. The pestilence succeeded this first scourge, and with such violence, that there was not a single house in that great city which entirely escaped it, or which had not some dead to mourn for. All places were filled with groans, and the living appeared almost dead with fear. The noisome exhalations of carcasses, and the very winds, which should have purified the air, loaded with infection and pestilential vapors from the Nile, increased the evil. The fear of death rendered the heathens cruel towards their nearest relations. As soon as any of them had caught the contagion, though their dearest friends, they avoided and fled from them as their greatest enemies. They threw them half dead into the streets, and abandoned them without succor; they left their bodies without burial, so fearful were they of catching that mortal distemper, which, however, it was very difficult to avoid, notwithstanding all their precautions. This sickness, which was the greatest of calamities to the pagans, was but an exercise and trial to the Christians, who showed on that occasion, how contrary the spirit of charity is to the interestedness of self-love. During the persecutions of Decius, Callus, and Valerian, they durst not appear, but were obliged to keep their assemblies in solitudes, or in ships tossed on the waves, or in infected prisons, or the like places, which the sanctity of our mysteries made venerable. Yet in the time of this public calamity, most of them, regardless of the danger of their own lives in assisting others, visited, relieved, and attended the sick, and comforted the dying. They closed their eyes, carried them on their shoulders, laid them out, washed their bodies, and decently interred them, and soon after shared the same fate themselves; but those who survived still succeeded to their charitable office, which they paid to the very pagans their persecutors. “Thus,” adds St. Dionysius, “the best of our brethren have departed this life; some of the most valuable, both of priests, deacons and laics; and it is thought that this kind of death is in nothing different from martyrdom.” And the Roman Martyrology says, the religious faith of pious Christians honors them as martyrs.

In these happy victims of holy charity, we admire how powerfully perfect virtue, and the assured expectation of eternal bliss, raises the true Christian above all earthly views. He who has always before his eyes the incomprehensible happiness of enjoying God in His glory, and seriously considers the infinite advantage, peace, and honor annexed to his divine service; he who is inflamed with an ardent love of God, and zeal for his honor, sets no value on anything but in proportion as it affords him a means of improving his spiritual stock, advancing the divine honor, and more perfectly uniting his soul to God by every heroic virtue: disgraces, dangers, labor, pain, death, loss of goods or friends, and every other sacrifice here becomes his gain and his greatest joy. That by which he most perfectly devotes himself to God, and most speedily and securely attains to the bliss of possessing Him, he regards as his greatest happiness.³

References:

- 1) Ministers of the Infirm: Camillian Religious. The Camillian martyrs to charity. Accessed 15 June 2022. <https://www.camilliani.org/en/the-martyrs-to-charity/>
- 2) Mike Aquilina. (2 June 2020). How the Church survived — and thrived — after a third-century plague. Angelus. Accessed 17 June 2022. <https://angelusnews.com/faith/finding-hope-in-the-third-century-churchs-plague-survival-instincts/>
- 3) Canon J.B. O'Connell (1956). *The Roman Martyrology*. Maryland: The Newman Press, 42-43.
- 4) Reverend Alban Butler (1883). *The Lives of the Saints*. Book II, Vol II-III. Re-published by Loreto Publications: Fitzwilliam, New Hampshire, 2020. (Original texts reproduced with permission), 243-244.

Note: This biography is for all desiring to grow in holiness and follow His Holiness Pope Pius XI address to 2000 nurses assembled at Castel Gondolfo on August 27, 1935 for the II World Congress of Catholic Nurses (www.ciciams.org / www.nacn-usa.org): *to first and foremost bring the Christian supernatural, Christ to our patients, bring salvation to souls*. May it also help nursing students with your Nursing History course. Source: Diana L. Ruzicka (2022). *The Book of Nurse Saints*. Available at www.lulu.com/spotlight/Ruzicka