

**St. Camillus de Lellis (Italy) (1550-1614)**

*Priest*

*Patron Saint of Nurses and Nurses' Association  
declared by Pope Pius XI in 1930.<sup>1 2</sup>*

*Established an order known initially as "Servants of the Sick,"  
then "Order of the Ministers of the Infirm" or now simply the "Camillians."  
Cared for the sick both in hospital and home.*



**Camillus de Lellis** was born on May 25, in the holy year 1550 (on the day dedicated to St. Urban, Pope and Martyr), in Bacchianico, Abruzzi, Kingdom of Naples, Italy To Camilla Compellio of Laureto and Giovanni de Lellis. His mother was a noble lady who was nearly 60 years old when Camillus was born. She died when he was young. His brother Giuseppe, born many years prior, had died as a child. His father was a military officer who was intimate friends of King Ferdinand and served in the rank of captain, under the Emperor Charles V in almost all the enterprises which were undertaken in Italy in his time.

Two unique events occurred in conjunction with his birth. A few days before his birth, his mother *dreamed that she had given birth to a son with a cross on his breast, who was followed by several children all decorated in the same way...if she had lived she would "see her son with many religious followers of his holy example, and full of his fervent zeal, all armed with the venerable sign of the cross, robbing the devil of multitudes of souls, and this chiefly at the time of their agony, when he always uses all his strength to assault them with greater fury."*

His mother's labor pains began while attending the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass which compelled her to return home. In unbearable pain, *"she was unable to give birth to the child on the place prepared for her; but almost beside herself, she rushed impetuously to the stable, and throwing herself down on the hay, she there immediately brought forth with the greatest ease: so that we may say, that Camillus would not consent to be born in a palace, or on a bed more luxurious than that in which his Lord willed to be born."*

As a young man, he served as a soldier fighting against the Turks, first for the Venetians and then for the Kingdom City State of Naples in the Neapolitan troops until 1574. As a young man he was addicted to cards and gaming to the point where he lost even what was necessary. For his subsistence, he was obliged to work for the Capuchin friars driving two donkeys and also working on a building. Through their influence he was converted in 1575 and never again resumed his gaming and gambling life. He attempted to enter the Capuchin friars and then the Grey Friars. Due to a leg injury which resulted in an oozing sore, he was not admitted. He went to Rome for medical treatment. He moved into San Giacomo (St. James) Hospital for the incurable where he worked for four years. He was especially attentive to the sick who were dying, both their temporal and spiritual needs. To better serve them he prepared himself to receive holy orders. He was ordained to the priesthood in 1584 by Thomas Goldwell, bishop of Asaph. As a priest he moved from the hospital to serve at the chapel of Our Lady's ad miracula.

Within the year, at age 32, he founded the Congregation of the Servants of the Sick (the Camillians or Fathers of a Good Death), caring for the sick, first in the hospital of the Holy Spirit in Rome and then in hospitals and homes that they established in several countries. In addition to the evangelical vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, the Camillians added a fourth vow of perpetually serving the sick. Camillus honored the sick as living images of Christ<sup>3</sup> and he taught his companions to do the same.

One of his companions, Sanzio Cicutelli, reported that, *“the three fervent laborers (Camillus, Bernardino and Curzi) began to attend the hospital of St. Spirito every day, where they served the sick with the most fervent charity... They gave them their food, they made their beds, they cleansed their tongues, they exhorted them to patience and the devout receiving of the sacraments, they suggested pious ejaculations, they recommended their souls, and, in fine, they performed acts of charity so intense, that it would be absurd to expect anything of the kind from even the most active of ordinary servants. Whoever saw them acting with such tenderness easily perceived that persons of that stamp did not look at the sick simply as men, but by a living faith and ardent charity served them as though they saw in them the very person of Jesus Christ, wounded and fainting, so that they occasioned great wonder and edification.”*<sup>4 5</sup>

Camillus viewed sickness as a time in which a Christian stands in need of the greatest constancy and fortitude and yet is the weakest. In Butler's Lives of Saints, it describes how Camillus exhorted his fellow companions to care for the sick, especially in their last hour. He exhorted them to provide every type of spiritual nourishment for the sick and dying: to suggest to them short acts of compunction and other virtues, to read to them, pray for them, teach them suitable ejaculations. He encouraged the sick to settle their temporal affairs so they might focus on their soul, disposing themselves to receive the last sacraments: extreme unction (the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick), viaticum (the Holy Eucharist as “food for the journey”) and an apostolic pardon. He instructed the dying to unite their death with that of the Savior. He instituted prayers for all those in agony or who were near their death. In addition, concerned that many hospitals were allowing people to be buried alive, he ordered his religious to continue the prayers for souls for a quarter of an hour after the patient seemed to have drawn their last breath. He also instructed that their face was not to be immediately covered thereby stifling their breathing.

In 1588 when a plague broke out upon ships anchored near Naples, the Servants of the Sick (Camillians), boarded the ships and cared for the sailors. Two died, the Order's first martyrs of charity. The Camillians cared for the sick also when a pestilence broke out in Rome. When others would not do so, the Camillians cared for those sick with contagious disease even risking their own lives.

In the last year of his life Camillus moved from Genoa to Rome. Admitted to the infirmary, Camillus de Lellis died 14 July 1614. When the infirmarian asked him whether he would take a little jelly, he answered, “Wait a quarter of an hour, and I shall be refreshed.” And in exactly a quarter of an hour he died. “During his whole sickness he was so absorbed in God, and so often breathed forth the most tender affections of love, thankfulness, and devotion, that it did not appear to be a man that was praying, but an angel already enjoying the beatific vision. And, lastly, when he received the Holy Viaticum, his face appeared to shine, and his eyes were fixed on the Blessed Sacrament, as though he saw there the most holy Humanity of our Saviour. All these circumstances prove that at the time God favored him with some heavenly vision.”

St. Camillus was initially buried near the high altar in St. Mary Magdalene's church in Rome, the Mother House of the Order of St. Camillus. After miracles were authentically proved, his remains were placed under the altar. He was beatified in 1742 and canonized in 1746 both by His Holiness Pope Benedict XIV (1740-1758). The symbol of the "red cross" originated with St. Camillus (Memorial: July 14; July 18 in USA).<sup>6</sup>

*"Think well, speak well, do well. These three things, through the mercy of God,  
will make a man go to heaven."*

*"The minister of the sick must be a man  
who approaches his brother,  
who needs to open his heart to the hope of a better tomorrow,  
who must be understood and supported in this effort of openness to  
the goals of the time that ends,  
but also on those of eternity, which never ends."*<sup>7</sup>

The following is from the *original* Reverend Alban Butler's Lives of Saints (1883) republished in 2020 by Loreto Publications:<sup>8</sup>

He was born in 1550 at Bacchianico in Abruzzo, in the kingdom of Naples. He lost his mother in his infancy, and six years after his father, who was a gentleman, and had been an officer, first in the Neapolitan and afterwards in the French troops in Italy. Camillus having learned only to read and write, entered himself young in the army, and served first in the Venetian, and afterwards in the Neapolitan troops, till, in 1574, his company was disbanded. He had contracted so violent a passion for cards and gaming, that he sometimes lost even necessities. All playing at lawful games for exorbitant sums, and absolutely all games of hazard for considerable sums are forbidden by the law of nature, by the imperial or civil law, by the severest laws of all Christian or civilized nations, and by the canons of the Church. No contract is justifiable in which neither reason nor proportion is observed. Nor can it be consistent with the natural law of justice for a man to stake any sum on blind chance, or to expose, without a reasonable equivalent or necessity, so much of his own or antagonist's money, that the loss would notably distress himself or any other person. Also many other sins are inseparable from a spirit of gaming, which springs from avarice, is so hardened as to rejoice in the loss of others, and is the source and immediate occasion of many other vices. The best remedy for this vice is, that those who are infected with it be obliged, or at least exhorted, to give whatever they have won to the poor.

Camillus was insensible of the evils attending gaming, till necessity compelled him to open his eyes; for he at length, was reduced to such straits, that for a subsistence he was obliged to drive two asses, and to work at a building which belonged to the Capuchin friars. The divine mercy had not abandoned him through all his wanderings, but had often visited him with strong interior calls to penance. A moving exhortation which the guardian of the Capuchins one day made him, completed his conversion. Ruminating on it as he rode from him upon his business, he at length alighted, fell on his knees, and vehemently striking his breast, with many tears and loud groans deplored his past unthinking sinful life, and cried to heaven for mercy. This happened in February in the year 1575, the twenty-fifth of his age, and from that time to his last breath he never interrupted his penitential course. He made an essay of a novitiate both among the Capuchins and the Grey Friars, but could not be admitted to his religious profession among either on account of a running sore in one of his legs, which was judged incurable. Therefore leaving his own country he went to Rome, and there served the sick in St. James's Hospital of incurables four years with great fervor. He wore a knotty hair shirt, and a rough brass girdle next to his skin; watched night and day about the sick, especially those that were dying, with the most scrupulous attention. He was most zealous to suggest to them devout acts of virtue and to procure them every spiritual help. Fervent humble prayer was the assiduous exercise of his soul, and he received the holy communion every Sunday and holiday, making use of St. Philip Neri for his confessarius. The provisors or administrators, having been witnesses to his charity, prudence and piety, after some time appointed him director of the hospital.

Camillus, grieving to see the sloth of hired servants in attending the sick, formed a project of associating certain pious persons for that office who should be desirous to devote themselves to it out of a motive of fervent charity. He found proper persons so disposed but met with great obstacles in the execution of his design. With a view of rendering himself more useful

in spiritually assisting the sick, he took a resolution to prepare himself to receive holy orders. For this purpose he went through a course of studies with incredible alacrity and ardor and received all his orders from Thomas Goldwell, bishop of St. Asaph's, suffragan to cardinal Savelli, the bishop viceregent in Rome, under Pope Gregory XIII. A certain gentleman of Rome named Firmo Calmo, gave the saint six hundred Roman sequines of gold (about two hundred and fifty pounds sterling), which he put out for an annuity of thirty-six sequines a year during his life, this amounting to a competent patrimony for the title of his ordination, required by the council of Trent and the laws of the diocese. The same pious gentleman, besides frequent great benefactions during his life, bequeathed his whole estate real and personal on Camillus's hospital at his death. The saint was ordained a priest at Whitsuntide in 1584, and being nominated to serve a little chapel called our Lady's ad miracula, he quitted the direction of the hospital. Before the close of the same year he laid the foundation of his congregation for serving the sick, giving to those who were admitted into it a long black garment with a black cloth for their habit. The saint prescribed them certain short rules, and they went every day to the great hospital of the Holy Ghost, where they served the sick with much affection, piety, and diligence, that it was visible to all who saw them, that they considered Christ himself as lying sick or wounded in his members.

They made the beds of the patients, paid them every office of charity, and by their short pathetic exhortations disposed them for the last sacraments and a happy death. The founder had powerful adversaries and great difficulties to struggle with, but by confidence in God he conquered them all. In 1585 his friends hired him a large house and the success of his undertaking encouraged him to extend further his pious views; for he ordained that the members of his congregation should bind themselves by the obligation of their institute to serve persons infected with the plague, prisoners, and those who lie dying in private houses.

Sickness is often the most severe and grievous of all trials; whence the devil made it his last assault in tempting Job. It is a time in which a Christian stands in need of the greatest constancy and fortitude, yet through the weakness of nature, is generally the least able to keep his heart united with God, and usually never stands more in need of spiritual comfort and assistance. The state of sickness is always a visitation of God, who by it knocks at the door of our heart, and puts us in mind of death; it is the touchstone of patience and the school, or rather the harvest of penance, resignation, divine love, and every virtue. Yet by a most fatal abuse is this mercy often lost and perverted by sloth, impatience, sensuality, and forwardness. Those who in time of health were backward in exercising fervent acts of faith, hope and charity, contrition, etc., in sickness are still more indisposed for practices with which they are unacquainted; and to their grievous misfortune sometimes pastors cannot sufficiently attend them, or have not a suitable address which will give them the key of their hearts, or teach them the art of insinuating into the souls of penitents the heroic sentiment and an interior relish of those essential virtues.

This consideration moved Camillus to make it the chief end of his new establishment, to afford or procure the sick all spiritual succor, discreetly to suggest to them short pathetic acts of compunction and other virtues, to read by them, and to pray for them. For this end he furnished his priests with proper books of devotion, especially on penance and on the sufferings of Christ, and he taught them to have always at hand the most suitable ejaculations extracted from the psalms and other devotions. But dying persons were the principal object of our saint's pious zeal and charity. A man's last moments are the most precious of his whole life, and are of infinite importance, as on them depends his eternal lot. Then the devil useth his utmost efforts to ruin a soul, and cometh down, having great wrath, knowing that he hath but a short time. The saint therefore redoubled his earnestness to afford every spiritual help to persons who seemed in danger of death. He put them early in mind to settle their temporal concerns, that their thoughts might be afterward employed entirely on the affair of their soul. He advised those friends not to approach them too much, whose sight or immoderate grief could only disturb or afflict them. He disposed them to receive the last sacraments by the most perfect acts of compunction, resignation, faith, hope, and divine love; and he taught them to make death a voluntary sacrifice of themselves to the divine will and in satisfaction for sin, of which it is the punishment. He instructed them to conjure their blessed redeemer by the bitter anguish which His heart felt in the garden and on the cross, and by His prayer with a loud voice and tears, in which he deserved to be heard for his reverence, that He would show them mercy, and give them the grace to offer upon their death in

union with His most precious death, and to receive their soul as he with His last breath recommended His own divine soul into the hands of His heavenly Father, and with it those of all his elect to the end of the world. He instituted prayers for all persons in their agony or who were near their death.

Everyone was charmed at so perfect a project of charity, and all admired that such noble views and so great an undertaking should have been reserved to an obscure illiterate person. Pope Sixtus V confirmed this congregation in 1586 and ordered that it should be governed by a triennial superior. Camillus was the first, and Roger, the Englishman, was one of his first companions. The church of St. Mary Magdalene was bestowed on him for the use of his congregation. In 1588 he was invited to Naples, and with twelve companions founded there a new house. Certain galleys having the plague on board were forbid to enter the harbor. Wherefore these pious Servants of the Sick (for that was the name they took) went on board and attended them, on which occasion two of their number died of the pestilence, and were the first martyrs of charity in this holy institute. St. Camillus showed a like charity in Rome when a pestilential fever swept off great numbers, and again when that city was visited by a violent famine. In 1591 Gregory XV erected his congregation into a religious order with all the privileges of the mendicant order, and under the obligation of the four vows of poverty, chastity, obedience and perpetually serving the sick, even those infected with the plague, he forbade these religious men to pass to any other order except that of the Carthusians. Pope Clement VIII in 1592 and 1600 again confirmed this order with additional privileges. Indeed the very end of this institution engaged all men to favor it, especially those who considered how many thousands die, even in the midst of priests without sufficient help in preparing themselves for that dreadful hour which decides their eternity; what superficial confessions, what neglect in acts of contrition, charity, restitution, and other essential duties, are often to be feared; which grievous evils might be frequently remedied by the assiduity of well qualified ministers.

Among many abuses and dangerous evils which the seal of St. Camillus prevented, his attention to every circumstance relating to the care of dying persons soon made him discover that in hospitals many are buried alive, of which Cicatello relates several examples, particularly of one buried in a vault, who was found walking about in it when the next corpse was brought to be there interred. Hence the saint ordered his religious to continue the prayers for souls yet in their agony for a quarter of an hour after they seem to have drawn their last breath, and not to suffer their faces to be covered so soon as is usual, by which means those that are not dead are stifled. This precaution is most necessary in cases of drowning, apoplexies, and such accidents and distempers which arise from mere obstructions or some sudden revolution of humors. St. Camillus showed still a far greater solicitude to provide all comforts and assistance for the souls of those that are sick, suggesting frequent short pathetic aspirations, showing them a crucifix, examining their past confessions and present dispositions, and making them exhortations with such unction and fervor that his voice seemed like a shrill trumpet and pierced the hearts of all who heard him. He encouraged his disciples to these duties with words of fire. He did not love to hear anything spoken unless divine charity made part of the subject, and if he had a sermon in which it was not mentioned, he would call the discourse a gold ring without a stone.

He was himself afflicted with many corporal infirmities, as a sore in his leg for forty-six years; a rupture for thirty-eight years which he got by serving the sick, two callous sores in the sole of one of his feet, which gave him great pain, violent nephritic colics, and for a long time before he died, a loss of appetite. Under this complication of diseases he would not suffer anyone to wait on him but sent all his brethren to serve poor sick persons. When he was not able to stand he would creep out of his bed, even in the night, by the sides of the beds, and crawl from one patient to another to exhort them to acts of virtue and see if they wanted anything. He slept very little, spending great part of the night in prayer and in serving the sick. He used often to repeat with St. Francis: "So great is the happiness which I hope for, that all pain and suffering is a pleasure." His friars are not obliged to recite the Church office unless they are in holy orders, but confess and communicate every Sunday and great holidays, have every day one hour's meditation, hear mass and say the litany, beads, and other devotions. The holy founder was most scrupulously exact in every word and ceremony of holy mass, and of the divine office. He despised himself to a degree that astonished all who knew him. He laid down the generalship in

1607 that he might be more at leisure to serve the poor. He founded religious houses at Bologna, Milan, Genoa, Florence, Ferrara, Messina, Palermo, Mantua, Viterbo, Bocchiano, Theate, Burgonono, Sinuessa, and other places. He had sent several of his friars into Hungary and to all other places which in his time were afflicted with the plague. When Nola was visited with that calamity in 1600, the bishop constituted Camillus his vicar general, and it is incredible what succors the sick received from him and his companions, of whom five died of that distemper. God testified his approbation of the saint's zeal by the spirit of prophecy and the gift of miracles on several occasions and by many heavenly communications and favors.

He assisted in the fifth general chapter of his order in Rome in 1613, and after it, with the new general, visited the houses in Lombardy, giving them his last exhortations, which were everywhere received with tears. At Genoa he was extremely ill, but being a little better, duke Doria Tursi sent him in his rich galley to Civita Vecchia, whence he was conveyed in a litter to Rome. He recovered so as to be able to finish the visitation of his hospitals, but soon relapsed, and his life was despaired of by the physicians. Hearing this, he said; "I rejoice in what hath been told me: 'We shall go into the house of the Lord.'" He received the Viaticum from the hands of cardinal Ginnasio, protector of his order, and said with many tears; "O Lord, I confess, I am the most wretched of sinners, most undeserving of Thy favor, but save me by Thy infinite goodness. My hope is placed in Thy divine mercy through Thy precious blood." Though he had lived in the greatest purity of conscience ever since his conversion, he had been accustomed to go every day to confession with great compunction and many tears. When he received the extreme unction he made a moving exhortation to his religious brethren, and having foretold that he should die that evening, he expired on the 14<sup>th</sup> of July, 1614, being sixty-five years one month and twenty days old. He was buried near the high altar in St. Mary Magdalene's church, but upon the miracles which were authentically approved, his remains were taken up and laid under the altar; they were enshrined after he was beatified in 1742, and in 1746 he was solemnly canonized by Benedict XIV. (*See the life of Camillus by Cicatello his disciples, and the acts of his canonization with those of Sts. Fidelis of Sigmaringa, Peter Regalati, Joseph of Leonissa, and St. Catharine de Ricci, printed at Rome in 1749, p. 10, 65, and 529, and Bullar. Rome. T. 16, p. 88. Heylor, Hist. des Ordres Relig. T. 4, p. 263.*)<sup>8</sup>

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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](http://www.ciciams.org) / [www.nacn-usa.org](http://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](http://www.lulu.com/spotlight/Ruzicka)