

# Saint Camillo De Lellis

Passages from the book: RITRATTI DEI SANTI (PORTRAITS OF SAINTS) written by Antonio Sicari (ed. Jaca Book)



In 1574, at the age of 24, Camillo De Lellis of Abruzzi orgine, was considered a finished man.

He was born from an elderly woman, "already" with white hair and a wrinkled face", said the chronicles. She was full of joy for this pregnancy but her feelings were also mixed with shame. She was sixty years old. The people recalling the Gospel, would call her Saint Elizabeth. She really felt the miracle of this unexpected birth, that when the time came on and felt she was giving birth, which was pronounced to be difficult, she went in the stable and wanted that her son be born in a manger, like Jesus Christ and Saint Francis. There this boy was born on Sunday of Pentecost of the Holy Year 1550, while the church bells were ringing at the moment of the Elevation.

He was a robust and much taller boy than the others (as an adult he was a very tall man), but his mother had sort of heart problems do to her age and maybe had some sad premonitions. As a matter of fact, no one was able to educate him. His father who was always far away, was an infantry captain and was serving in the sad and renowned-armed troop of Fabrizio Maramaldo.

He personally, Giovanni De Lellis, was considered a good man and in some way a good Christian, even if he started his military carrier participating at the terrible Sacco of Rome and concluded it with another similar episode in 1559.

He however, wasn't able to be a good parent. His wife died when Camillo was only thirteen years old and he was already a little indomitable rebel.

Camillo then started to accompany his father from a military district to another and began to assimilate a destructive passion for the cards and dice games. This environment made him become a vulgar bully.

Camillo's father died at age 70 while he was trying to recruit himself in the war against the Turks and after he recruited his son in this war, he lost everything. The only things he left his son were the sword and dagger.

Camillo was judged from everyone as being, "fantastic, libertine and queer", which in the language of that time meant: thoughtless and violent, but however, having lots of generosity.

For many years, except for a worrying period of which we shall mention later on, lived his life as an adventure soldier, risking his life in the battles, strives and then playing off all the money he had earned. His dignity and military life was decreasing to a point that he recruited himself in the ill-famed bands.

In 1574, he escaped a shipwreck and landed in Naples where he was caught by a frenzy to play-off literally all his belongings; his liquidation leave, the sword, the arquebus, powder jars and his mantle. That is to say, he even "lost his shirt", another way of saying "he lost absolutely everything".

He ended up rambling like a dog, roaming about aimlessly, with shame, stealing and begging in front of churches with "infinite flushing". At the end he had to adapt himself in working for the

construction of a Capuchin convent, conducting burden beasts loaded with stones, limes and bales of water needed for the construction workers.

He refused the fatigue with such violence that he would bite his hands for the rage and was tempted (as he will confide later one) to cut the throats of those poor burden beasts and then flee away.

But the closeness of these monks, was in some way not indifferent to him. In the past when he got terrible fears during the battles, he would make a half vow of becoming a monk (which was immediately re-eaten).

During a trip to the Saint Giovanni Rotondo convent, it was the Holy year 1575, he there encountered a monk that took him aside and told him: *"God is everything. The rest is nothing. We must save our souls, which never dies..."* In his long journey back home, through the Gargano ravines, Camillo meditated.

All of a sudden he got off his saddle and he threw himself crying to the ground: *"My God I have sinned. Forgive this sinner! This miserable me that for many years didn't know nor loved you. My God give me time to cry out long my sins"*.

He asked to become a Capuchin, but for two times he was dismissed from the convent, and the reason is tied to the episode that we have omitted to narrate up to now. From the time of his war raids with his father, a sore starting opening in Camillo's leg, which remained incurable for the rest of his life and that, was getting horrible as time passed on. A doctor who visited him in Genoa said it to be a "big rotten, corrosive ulcer".

Some thought it to be the terrible century illness: the acquired or hereditary syphilis, due to his bad habits or those of his father. The major part of the biographers' exclude this and they only talk about dystrophic ulcers. However, Camillo was now belonging to the "incurable" category. He already was for a certain period at the roman hospital Saint Giacomo, where all the most horrible sicknesses and many other ill people were trying to be cured.

They had to throw him out because above all he was "terribly sick to his head": quarrelsome, powerful and negligent fellow, always searching to satisfy his passion for certain games.

During the night he would even lower himself from the window and would go about searching for boatmen and porters with which he could play with up till dawn.

He returned for a second time at the hospital as a novitiate Capuchin. His behaviour was really different, charitable, but very reserved. Camillo thought above all about the convent. He finally could return the sore started to suppurate again. The Capuchins had decided for his definite resignation. Camillo then returned to that hospital where his illness was chaining him.

Here we must stop and better describe how the situation of the hospitals was at that time: knowing that those of Rome were the best in the world.

The most repugnant ill people arrived at the hospital for the incurable. These poor people (who were very horrible at sight) were considered social rubbish and sometimes would be literally unloaded in front of the building without any assistance.

Normally there were about 70 beds available which became 500 in alternating years when a certain radical cure was administrated (the cure of the wood water, very expensive and known at that time). It was above all the treatment for syphilis, but also for those who wanted to disinfect themselves. Torquato Tasso also wanted the treatment for his "melancholy humour" and Aldo Manuzio for his eyes. The treatment would last for about 40 days.

But if the hospitals were enough known for their medicine in that period, they were terribly known for other points of view. There was no one who would take care of those repugnant beings, even the priests would run away from their religious assistance. The ill were in the hands of the mercenaries; some, criminals were obliged to work there with force, others, for not having other possibilities of earnings. What happened there is unimaginable for us.

Here is a page from a chronicler dated 1600:

*"They were forced....to be serviced, as to say.... from the dregs of the world, that is ignorant ministers, bandits or guilty of some crimes, confining them for punishment in the said places.... One thing was sure that those poor agonising people would stay many days without no one giving them a word of comfort or consolation. Sometimes days would pass without anybody who would feed them with any sort of food. How many poor serious ill people would remain in their beds without having their linen changed and lying there with worms and dirty remains? How many weak ill people would get up on their own for their necessities and would fall on the ground dying or drastically injuring themselves? Some wanted to drink but didn't have water even to wash the rinse their mouth? Some with such anger and great fervour would drink their urine...."*

*But what I will now describe, no one shall believe. So many poor dying people who were not dead yet, would be taken by those mercenaries and would be thrown with dead corpses and sometimes would be buried alive?...."*

These are not exaggerations, because similar episodes happened in other hospitals in that time. When Camillo and his colleagues started to work in the greater hospital of Milan (called "Cà Granda") they found this place in such a state that they considered it "the cause of death": *"God only knows how many people die in these dirty, foul smelling and muddy places!."*

Besides the general carelessness, these poor people were treated with violence by the mercenaries who would beat and slap them when they were given the necessary medicines. Sometimes they would lift them from the bed with such violence, that they would literally die in their hands.

To the incurables Camillo was well known for his conversions. He was nominated Maestro di Casa (Master of the House). He had the immediate responsibilities for economic and organisation trends. He started to put order in the hospital.

He knows by experience how these "abnormal devilled people" worked; he knows all the tricks that he himself had exerted and he became omnipresent. He would appear day and night when no one was expecting him; would recall, reprimand and obliged everyone to do his or her work and above all, to do it well.

He would control all purchases, quarrel with the sellers and would send back all the spoil food and where he couldn't order would give himself to others as an example of life.

The question is "tenderness".

Many saw him clean and kiss the nude face of those poor who were consumed by cancer. He would introduce and personally took care of the hospitality ritual; every ill would be received at the door and hugged. His or her feet would be washed and kissed; the worn clothes would be taken off and would be given clean clothing and then would be arranged in a perfect remade bed.

He would explain to the mercenaries that: *"The poor are God's pupil and heart... and what will be done to these poor will be done to God himself"*.

He began gathering sensible people, would pray and communicate with them (he who just little knows how to read and write) the first main theology principles of suffering.

A fixed thought was now obsessing him: there is the need to substitute all the mercenaries with people who wish to stay among the ill with love.

He wanted people "not for payment, but willingly and for the love of God would kindness serve as like mothers do with their sick children". This was the project, but this awoke some preoccupations. Those few friends he had were isolated; in fact, some thought that interests and habits would be put into discussions, others suspected that Camillo wanted to possess the hospital and others considered this project unrealisable.

The same Saint Filippo Neri, confessor of Camillo, dissuaded him because he thought that this ignorant man was neither able nor capable of governing many people all together!." Camillo on his side was serene: *"I thought that all the hell could not disturb nor hinder this started project."*

He believed that Crucified Jesus Christ is asking this to him.

Nevertheless, he understands that to acquire credibility, he must with his people start the path of priesthood. He miraculously succeeded in the order even if he didn't know anything about speculative theology and wasn't even capable of writing a sentence without making many and ridiculous spelling errors.

He leaves the hospital of the incurable where he was not wanted anymore. He gathered those that were with him in a poor house, where they only had two blankets for all and that during the night would share this blanket among themselves.

They freely started their activity in the roman hospital called Saint Spirit. It is the Hospitium Aspotolorum, the hospital wanted directly by the Pope where he confided it to the religious of Saint Spirit. Innocenzo III, the great Pope of '200, founded this hospital. He wanted it to be dwelt by the owners (that is the ill) and the servants (that is to say all the other Christians).

The monks that directed that hospital made a vow to be "servants" of their owners (the infirm) for all their "lives". However, in the era of Camillo, these "servants" were reduced to a few and were more than the owners.

Sisto IV, the Pope of the Cappella Sistina, renewed the hospital with such splendour to re-propose at least ideally its original value. Not a lot of people know that, besides the Cappella Sistina, there also existed the Corsia Sistina (Sistina Ward) that of Saint Spirit, which is one of the Rome's most beautiful works of art.

None of the churches of Rome, neither the Cappella Sistina has a splendid entrance. It is an immense ward: 120 meters in length, 12 meters in width, 13 meters in height, having coffered ceiling as that of the most beautiful roman basilicas and in the centre a splendid octagonal dome. The walls are painted in fresco on top and are covered with arabesque leather. There are two rows of beds for the sick along the wall side, each one with its own canopy and columns as if they were thrones.

In the backside of the ward there is a little chapel of the Palladio where the Eucharist was exposed to the public. There was a big organ and concerts were given twice a week for the sick during meal times.

The entrance to the ward was free of charge. Who entered in the morning to hear the Mass could then serve Jesus through their ill brothers. Everyone who wanted to make and execute charity, could freely enter the Saint Spirit hospital: the voluntary assistance was permitted and recommended to pilgrims that come to Rome, to the religious, to the priests, to the cardinals, to the literates, to the craftsmen, to the penitents, to the sinners that must expiate their sins, to the saints .....

The hospital Saint Spirit was an example of how the hospitals should be according to the Christian concept. There is a scripture on the front entrance of the Maggiore hospital of Turin and it reads:

"The cult of love due to Christ, God and man, diseased in the poor".

At the Saint Spirit hospital this declaration of faith was structurally placed in evidence.

Unfortunately, as the great Church faith was revealing, also the worldly poverty was walking side by side.

The men shown to be unworthy of that solemn scripture: the mercenary problems were similar to the ones observed in other hospitals; the hygienic problems and the filth that considerably humiliated such splendour, the voluntary service transformed in disorder and the ideal in daily meanness.

The "Saint Spirit" was a sort of extreme concreteness of the mystery and paradox of the Church. In that place where "human" reform was considered "impossible", for thirty years Camillo and his friends worked together and little by little becoming a new religious congregation: the order of the Ministers for the Infirm.

For them the hospital was everything and they slowly worked and achieved to impress the charismatic quality of tenderness.

Camillo really liked music. He would often go in the Churches to hear the concerts, but when he left would say: *"I nevertheless, enjoy another kind of music... the one that the poor infirm at the hospital make when all together call and say: Father, give me some water for rinsing my mouth, remake my bed, heat my feet...."*

He is seen one night kneeling beside a poor infirm that had a pestiferous and bad-smelling mouth cancer and that no one could tolerate, but he nonetheless, was breath to breath with him and would whisper loving words as if he was insane of his love, particularly calling him: *"My Sir, my soul, what can I do to service you?"* thinking that this infirm was his beloved Jesus Christ...."

A testimony said, *"I saw him cry several times for the passionate commotion that in that poor man be the presence of Christ, so that he adored the infirm as it was God in person"*.

He never wanted days for rest. When he was obliged to do so, he would secretly return. He would bring with himself all that could serve his sick: blessed water, a book to recommend the souls of the agonising, fresh drinking water, chamber-pots; and even "a small copper basin where they could spit undisturbed". These were his vestments and instruments of his liturgy. Sometimes, when he was serving food, Camillo would tell them his sins because he was convinced that he was confessing them to Christ in person. Let's read other testimonies.

*"When he would take someone in his arms to change the bed linen, he did it with such love and care, as though he would be doing it to Jesus Christ"*.

He never left an ill when he finished to serve him, without kissing his hands or face. He didn't know what else he could do. Who knew him said, "if he had one hundred hands he would employ all hundred for that service".

He sometimes never received gratitude in exchange. When he became old, he said to his fellow monks.

*"I have sometimes received punches, slaps, spits and every type of rudeness from the infirm, but nonetheless I am happy and content because they can and say these things as my legitimate masters"*.

One day he brought with himself one of his younger monks to teach him how to clean the ill and he saw Camillo's hands all dirty.

The young monk was observing with disgust. Camillo looked at him: *"Our Lord, said, let me have the grace to die with my hands pasted with this saint mixture of charity"*.

He made another monk remake a straw bed and said to him *"Look, the straw is of gold colour and it is really gold because with it we can buy the heavens"*.

He would excuse himself for not knowing of other things to talk about than charity towards the ill and he would say – *"like a country priest that knows only how to read the missal, so I don't say other than this"*.

Some evenings when he would return to the convent, he would call his fellow monks in front of him and he would place a bed in the middle of the room and pile all the mattresses and blankets. He then would make one of the monks lie on the bed and would teach all of them how a bed must be remade without disturbing the ill, how to change the bed linen and how to give a facial expression towards the suffering. He would then make the monks practice and practice.

Sometimes he would yell: *"Put more heart in what you are doing – I want to see more maternal love"* or *"Put more of your souls in your hands"*.

One day the Commander of Saint Spirit hospital arrived (the most highest of the authorities) and impatiently wanted to speak with Camillo, but he was at the moment feeding an ill:

*"Please tell Monsignore that I am now occupied with Jesus Christ and that as soon as I have finished, I will present myself in front of his most illustrious Lordship"*. He didn't say this for stubbornness, but, because he was very convinced.

*"It looked like, said his biographer, that he didn't live inside of himself anymore. Only Jesus Christ and the most poor dwelt inside of him"*.

Little by little many young men confided with him to share his way of life and Camillo started to "occupy" other hospitals.

He reaches up-to Naples, Genoa, Milan, Mantua. Indeed, exactly in Milan, the hard matter of the hospitals explodes. Camillo on his own, without consulting anybody took the occasion to be entrusted with the whole hospital, in order to cure and not only the assistance to the sick, but also the entire material managing.

For Camillo, there was no distinction between material and spiritual. He wanted to do everything that regarded the ill. His monks were not agreeing with him, and on other hand were right, because they thought that they would finish to help the administrators to save money and not at all helping the ill. But for Camillo, everything that slightly regarded his poor was sacred and had to be gathered.

He was the first to exhaust himself.

It has remained renowned the overflowing of the Tevere in Christmas of 1598, when Camillo faced with this danger and while his fellow monks were bellowing that there was no danger, he immediately obliged them to transport all the three hundred sick with their belongings to the top floor of the building.

When the last ill was transferred, the Tevere overflowed and the water reached 3 meters in height from the pavement submerging everything. But the ill were all saved.

Everyone would run for every emergency to Camillo, above all during the pestilence and famine period, that exploded everywhere with incredible violence and that the dead seem to "kill the living".

At the end of his life, Camillo, had founded 14 convents, had the responsibilities of 8 hospitals (4 completely) and had with him 80 novitiates and 242 professed religious people.

Turned old, Camillo, withdraws from his superior assignments and asks to live and die in Saint Spirit hospital and to be able to close his eyes amongst his poor.

To the general of the Carmelitani Scalzi that goes to see him, says:  
*"I have been a big sinner, game player and man of bad life".*

But he could also say about himself:

*"Since God has illuminated and called me to his service, I don't recall from God's Grace to have never committed mortal nor voluntary venial sins".*

One night a monk places the head of a nurse where Camillo is slowly dying and sees him contemplating a painting where he sees himself at the feet of the cross.

*"What are you doing?", Camillo then replies, "I'm waiting for good news from my Lord" : "Come my blessed because I was infirm and you have visited me".*

He dies at age 64, but first he wanted to write his last will to leave in inheritance all of himself. He makes all of his fellow monks sign the testament and to put it around his neck and have him be buried with it.

The testament is a total and detailed consignment of himself:

*"I Camillo de Lellis, .....leave my body to the earth where from the earth I have been made. I leave Satan, the wicked tempter, all my sins and insults that I have committed against God and I repent myself down deep in my soul. I also leave to the world all my vanities.... and I wish to exchange this earth life with the certainty of Paradise... all my earthly belongings with all eternal things, all my friends with the companionship of the Saints, all my relatives with the gentleness of the angels and finally all the worldly curiosities with the true vision of God's face. I leave and donate my soul to my beloved Jesus and to his mother... and to my guardian angel.*

*I leave my will in the hands of the Virgin Mary mother of the Almighty God and I don't intend to want other than what the Queen of all Angels wants.*

*Finally, I leave to Jesus Christ all myself, soul and body, and confide in his immense goodness and mercy to receive me and to forgive me, as he did with Magdalene; it shall be pleasant for me as it was for the good thief in the extreme of his life to stay on the Cross....".*

He in fact died smiling while the priest was assisting him pronouncing words from the prayers of the agonising: *"Mitis atque festius Christi Jesu tibi aspectus appareat"*, "Christ show your mild and jovial face".

Today the actions of Camillo de Lellis which filled the entire Italy with his charity towards the ill, can seem very distant in time and not that necessary.

Our hospitals, our ill, we can say, are not in those tragic conditions in which Camillo was immersed with this violent tenderness.

In reality things are not really like this. Some episodes which have been narrated of Saint Camillo de Lellis, as example, can be read as such in the life of Mother Theresa of Calcutta and of her sisters that have embraced and helped to die "like angels" all the poor found agonising in the streets and sewers, and they offer themselves alone to acknowledge Christ in all the plaque-stricken people of our time.

Nevertheless, at least, in the western countries, the hospitals are not those terrible places that we have described as long as we can keep under control all epidemics and fatal infections.

In fact, we modern men, do not know how to probably react, if those days would return in which all the ill would concretely mean daily risk of the proper lives of doctors, nurses and

hospital assistants. The signals in subject are not so encouraging and the panic and selfishness would rapidly and heavily re-fall in an unmentionable chaos placing our most modern structures on their knees. Well then there would be the necessity to have Saints that only the church can supply us.

But still the most serious is the human horror that remains under the skin of our public sanitary organisation and of our medical skilled staffs.

The sins that the church denounces today (the massacre of innocents through abortion, the embryo manipulations, the euthanasia hiddenly or openly practised) if they could be described and observed in their concrete practise and inhumanity, they could not appear less cruel and horrible.

Moreover, the only thing that we have gained from the past centuries is the capacity of making relative traces disappear.

Besides, even the ill of our time are still greatly hospitalised and cured for, but sometimes they do complain that they do not feel like "persons" but rather than "ill parts" that have been given to the doctors or nurses with the hope that they will be restored to health.

Neither the ill people receive integral considerations nor who cures them offers himself/herself entirely. The encounter in the best of cases, between a sickness and a competence: the rest is anonymous and the solitude is bitter. Even on this ancient "total fulfilment" taught by S. Camillo, of his capability to share himself from person to person and making them highly shine like the sun.

Even our hospitals justly observe a modern biography of our Saint. The hospitals are no longer considered places consecrated to grief and sorrow, but are often and only "profaned homes contaminated by interest calculations, ambitions and insensibility of the healthy towards the sick".

In any case, the problem will not be resolved until the ill will be considered as sacred people.

Today, in a time of impending euthanasia, we cannot non recall that in Bologna and in Piacenza the "sons" of Camillo were called by the population "The Fathers of the good death" and in Florence and around Tuscany, "The Fathers of the nice dying".

For all the problems of mankind, the Church has replies that are conserved not only in its intelligence, but above all in its memory and in the recollection of its Saints that have loved Christ to such an extent to totally submerge themselves, with charity, in all that is human.

A minister of the Indian government, comparing the results obtained by Mother Theresa and those obtained by the public assistance, said one day with great admiration and sadness: *"the difference between you and us is this: we do it for something – you do it for someone"*.

This is the whole secret and splendour of Christianity; that everything and everyone is the sign of SOMEONE that of everything and everyone is the REDEEMER.

This is another little episode we wish to narrate from the life of Camillo as the conclusion of the whole story, almost wanting to fix an image:

*"One day....seeing that so many poor were thrown to the ground on top of the straw because the beds were full, and he, standing there with such an admiration and contemplation, was asked the reason why he be so sorrowful. He replied, I am eating bread of sorrow to see these members of Jesus Christ suffering.."*

Living for him meant "totally offering oneself for Jesus Christ through the ill".