

July 14, 2024

**Solemnity of St. Camillus de Lellis**

Church of "Santa Maria Maddalena," Rome

**Homily by H.E. Msgr. Benoni AMBARUS**

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A few months ago Father Umberto d'Angelo, a Camillian and chaplain *at St. John Lateran Hospital - Rome* - gave me a volume with the life of St. Camillus, and reading it, at a certain point I had an inner reaction, thus saying, "*But you're a bit exaggerated, Camillus!*" especially when there is that episode of which it is told that a person sees St. Camillus particularly dejected, suffering and he says, "*Of course, I am eating bread of sorrow*" because he had seen in that day a whole series of very tiring situations, stories of sick people who lived in particularly uncomfortable and abandoned conditions.

And I was very struck by that expression "*I am eating bread of sorrow.*" As I prepared this celebration and read the first reading (Sir. 4:1-6.10), I felt I had to connect it to the invitation of the author of Sirach to the son, that is, to the disciple: he addresses to him these words that we have heard, very accurate words. They are words of love directed to this son: "Look, if in your life you want to have a consistent life, and not flicker, if you want to have a consistent life, I teach you how to live it." First, let us consider, as throughout the first reading, the category we call 'the poor.'

Who is poor? The two or three persons who stand outside begging? Yes. The people who are sick? Yes. The lonely persons? Yes. Actually in the category of the poor, if we are honest, we have to put all of us in it.

Faith itself is nothing but a recognition of our littleness, our poverty and openness to God's need. To have faith is to live an act of humility before the greatness of God: it is a form of existential poverty, a relational poverty, a poverty of meaning and so on. But there are in human life persons who, in addition to this kind of existential poverty, experience a surplus of poverty, including material poverty, but especially relational poverty: they are persons who experience more bitterness in existence; they are those who look around and have no support in life, those who walk around a city and meet no friendly gaze; people who walk around a city, a neighborhood, an apartment building and are

'transparent,' not seen by anyone. That's it: these kinds of categories of people who have, I repeat, a surplus of poverty, have a bitter life.

The author of the book of Sirach insists, "Son, do not look away from these people. Do not turn away from them. Be like a husband to the widow, like a father to the orphan." That is, be with them, close to them, don't pretend they don't exist; be hurt by their sufferings, their bitterness; be troubled even by their gaze.

Giving a penny to a poor person begging for alms is the easiest thing in the world: you just don't even have to have your gaze cross with him and move on. To let yourself be wounded by the person's wound, to live a bread of sorrow, as St. Camillus says, with the one you meet and see, who has a heavy load of bitterness in existence, that is what gives us consistency of life! This does not mean that the road will be easier, but it will certainly be more consistent, more human, more authentic. So here is the invitation so carefully in the book of Sirach to each of us today: recurs twice the expression "*do not look away*".

That is, we should somehow be, according to this invitation, people who in their existence, everywhere seek and desire eye contact with the other; almost as if to say, tell me your secret, tell me your life, and thus be people who flank the other, to break the bitterness of others.

And why do we have to do this? Because we all feel poor!

Those of us who say '*I don't need anyone*' are denying ourselves our own condition in life, because all of us, more or less, are in some way beggars for something: in need of recognition, reward, affection, attention, presence, relationship.

The author of the book of Sirach says again, "Beware! for if the poor man should curse you, his curse will draw the Lord's wrath" ... the Lord listens even more to the voice of the poor and the prayer of their bitterness.

Openness to the poor, as the second reading emphasizes (Rom 12:6-16b), is to be lived with a charity, without pretense. What does a charity without pretense mean? Pretense is something that remains on the outside, on the surface; it is a robe you put on, a role with which you cover yourself, an outward gesture of which you are seen as the author. Charity without pretense is a form of love, a specification of charity that penetrates your heart, a unique experience between what you do and what you feel!

And it is beautiful that in the Church, as urged by the second reading, everything can be done in charity, even if with different charisms. This is the beauty of the Church.

There are many charisms, and each believer, living his or her charism always with charity and love, enriches the whole Church and all humanity.

From this point of view, St. Camillus' charism is one that still shakes us today and cannot fail to shake us. All the more so in these times, when it seems that becoming sick or ill is a luxury and caring for oneself is an option only for the wealthiest people.

In Matthew's gospel (Mt 25), we heard only the first part of 'come blessed,' we did not hear the second part of 'go away cursed': both sides experience great astonishment, both those who are told *come* and those who are told *go away*.

Both sides experience a reaction of amazement. "*Lord, when did we see you hungry and give you food, in prison we visited you, you were sick and we visited you, naked and gave you clothing, when*"?

What does this attitude of amazement reflect? It reflects something very simple: these 'blessed' people acted not for reward, but because they encountered fatigued human beings. This is charity without pretense: I don't do it for the reward; I don't do it to be good or esteemed compassionate. I do it because there is a person I have crossed paths with and I have let my heart be wounded by his bitterness.

After this encounter, I cannot continue my life as if nothing had happened. Jesus says it clearly, "Whenever you did it to them, you did it to me." You did not know it, perhaps, but you did it to me! Jesus identifies Himself with the poor; but not in an abstract or sentimental way: Jesus is really in the poor, and all the categories mentioned - hungry, thirsty, sick, naked, imprisoned, foreigners - are *sacrament* of Christ.

The poor man is a sacrament of Christ: in him there is a living representation of Christ, even if in that form of poverty there should be situations, behaviors, if you will, that are not exactly orthodox. Fr. Luigi di Liegro used to say, "If a poor person blasphemes, it is God who blasphemes!"

We serve the other not for the reward, but because we really believe we have the only way to love the Lord: the concretization of the face of Christ is in the person wounded by different kinds of poverty we encounter. Hence the astonishment, "when did we ever, Lord, do that"?

In the life of St. Camillus it is told that a cardinal summons him for a meeting. Camillus replies, "*Tell Mr. Cardinal that now I am busy with God, I am busy with the Lord, then I will meet him.*" Here is the greatness of St. Camillus: he had succeeded in making this passage in the heart, in which he met the Lord Jesus in each person!

To conclude. I realize that this way of living and loving is a way that can only be divine. Only God has such a great measure: or rather, only God can give us such a great measure of love, an exaggerated love. Only the Lord can expand our hearts to such an extent that we almost forget ourselves!

Only the Lord can set our hearts on fire to such an extent that we say '*I don't want to and can't live without noticing the other person, without allowing myself to be hurt by the other person's fatigue, anguish, bitterness, without doing something.*'

We believers should evangelize like this! St. Francis of Assisi sending friars to preach, exhorted them, "*Go, proclaim the Gospel; if you cannot, use words as well.*" Here is the greatness of St. Camillus. His style, his mad love for the sick and their suffering, consumed him, but consuming him, made him luminous: and it is that light that still shines down the centuries.

Let us ask St. Camillus to intercede with God for this divine love for each of us: the only love that gives consistency in life.

We do not delude ourselves; we do not build life on superfluous things that do not give us satisfaction, that do not give us consistency in life.

We need this divine love, and Saint Camillus showed it to us with his whole existence!