

# SAINTS FOR THE SICK ...

housebound, disabled, hospitalized

Monk Matthew

## Help

There is real help.

It is help which transforms the sufferings of 'the sick'—be you only temporarily in hospital, or permanently crippled, diseased, chair-bound, in constant or intermittent pain.

Those who have experienced this help are themselves the living evidence of its reality. There is the crippled young woman whose condition is relatively painless. but who knew the pain of a sour resentment in her helpless reliance on others and 'the things I am missing.' She now radiates a joy which attracts those she previously resented. There are many in pain whose sense of loss and futility has been turned to great purpose, and with others still there is a new, deep peace of the soul where, before. they fretted in a bedridden gloom of despondency.

The help which thus transformed these sufferers, and a myriad more besides, is waiting for others of 'the sick' to approach, invite, and receive what no doctor, nurse, relative, specialist, nor yet medicines, can supply.

It is the help of the saints.

The saints are concerned in, and actively involved with, what is going on down here ... with us who are going through our test and development period on earth.

Their words have the seal of divine approval because of their canonization, and little St Teresa of Lisieux well summarized the reality of this involvement when she said, just before she died: 'I feel that my mission is soon to begin ... I will spend my heaven doing good on earth. This is not impossible, since the angels from the very heart of the beatific vision keep watch over us. No, I shall not be able to take any rest until the end of the world.'

So, the saints are concerned with us, really hungering to help us win through our test-stint. But they cannot force their help on us; it is in the Divine order that they can enter only where they are invited. We must, in prayer, approach them.

No one knows or knew this better than the saints themselves. Early in his life St Cyprian, for instance, was telling everybody:

'We should look to Heaven as our real home; there a great multitude awaits us of those who are freed from care for their own salvation but are full of care for ours.'

St Stanislaus teaches us 'in every trial in life, and above all in sickness and in the hour of death, to ask the prayers of our saint and to trust fearlessly in his aid.'

The great St Augustine relied constantly on the intercession of the saints: 'God, who created all things, is in all places, and is everywhere to be worshipped. Yet his infinite wisdom thinks fit to work wonders at the intercession of his saints ...' And St John Chrysostom was forever imploring people to recognize that 'the prayers of the saints have mighty power to help our need ... let us call upon them, for they can be bolder of speech in death than when they lived.' Others proclaim: 'When beset by temptations we do well to call upon the saints, who reign with Christ. They are stronger than the evil spirits which fight against us. They were powerful during their lives against the impulses of evil, and they are more powerful now that they have passed from the Church on earth to the Church triumphant.'

'Choose some particular saints', instructs St Francis de Sales, 'that you may enter more deeply into their spirit and imitate them, and have a special confidence in their intercession.'

Whom, then, are we to choose? We naturally have a closer affinity with those who experienced on earth what we are experiencing now.

What they give is not something remote, distant, in 'the future'. It is here, in our sick-room, wheel-chair or bed ... and as we talk with them in prayer ... as they communicate with us and on our behalf ... we get to know them ... a little more each day until, as so many have discovered, a personal intimacy develops which makes for an awareness of their presence and friendship. which is all very real.

Here, then, are just a few of the saints waiting, now, for your approach ...

BLESSED LYDWINA never left her bed for the last thirty years of her life; for more than twenty of them she was unable to keep down any food, and her diseases, one biographer relates, 'are so distressing as to be almost unreadable.'

Before she became permanently bedridden at the age of sixteen, her life, almost from the day she was born into a poor family at Scheidam in Holland on Palm Sunday, 1380, seemed to be one illness after another.

Lydwina's body was so racked with pain, and for such prolonged periods, that it would be difficult to believe had it not been recorded by Thomas a Kempis and others of like truthfulness who knew her personally.

Many of us are inclined to think of saints as being different from the rest of us, but Blessed Lydwina's example demonstrates that we are all meant to be saints, and that the way there begins with firmly grasping the fact that pain, disease, infirmities, suffering, can come to us only with God's permission. If we can but grasp that in being thus tested beyond the norm—'as gold in the furnace he hath proved them' (Wis 3.6)—suffering suddenly makes sense; we know its value, we understand the tremendous depth of eternal promise in, for instance, St John Chrysostom's: 'If you suffer thankfully your profit will increase in proportion to the greatness of what you suffer.'

Where to begin?

'We must begin with patience and detachment', says St Bernard, 'and at last we shall learn' to love the sufferings which liken us to the Passion of our Redeemer.'

We must, in practice, make conscious effort to desire holiness. In prayer, we invite graces - 'To will is for us—to accomplish is for God'—and it is in this effort of will that our transformation will begin.

Lydwina was in her teens when she first made this effort. First she made the decision to stop complaining, then she asked her parish priest to visit her. They talked about our Lord: she learned the real meaning of 'offering our suffering to Christ' -as can we all with a little perseverance. Soon she was receiving Holy Communion and confessing almost daily, and for her last twenty years, when she could swallow no food, the Eucharist was her only nourishment.

She reached the level of living for Christ where it is no longer possible to suffer, and, as he will with all sufferers who thus dispose themselves, Christ grew in her. People around saw the change in her. Her bare, impoverished room in her parents' frugal cottage became a place of joy. Her words became gentle, full of charity and Christ's values, and those who had once been harsh towards her progressively turned to her for comfort and advice.

This is promised to all of us who follow her example. In Lydwina's case she went on to attain exceptional spiritual heights, experiencing visions and sometimes rising to the level of spiritual ecstasy. Towards the end of her time on earth, crowds were queueing to consult her. She was venerated long after she had gone to heaven, and the son of one of her doctors built a hospital on the site of her cottage.

Lydwina's example assures us that no special gifts or circumstances are required, and a good way to begin is with our parish priest. The initial effort of prayer and willed desire must come from us, and God will do the rest.

ST CAMILLUS DE LELLIS is another who demonstrates that many saints are no different from the rest of us when they start out—having no special advantages or sense of vocation.

Camillus suffered an obstinate disease in his leg which caused a painful deterioration of health for thirty years, terminating with his death in 1614, but his youth and early manhood were as 'worldly' as can be, with no interest in our Lord beyond the impious routines of a nominal Catholic.

His family were of the Italian nobility, and in his youth Camillus lived the self-indulgent life of the aristocracy of the time. He left home when he was seventeen to join an army, and he took part in the business of killing and maiming with neither care nor mercy until he was ignominiously discharged after four years.

He was very big physically, very strong and constantly in trouble because of a violent temper, which combined with debts incurred by his passion for heavy gambling to place him in disgrace—even by army standards!

I do not think many of us can be such unpromising material for sainthood as that—and yet, in a sense, it proved a case of being shown the world that he might reject it.

Beneath his dislikeable character he had a fine brain and profound mind and, like many before him and since, he came to realize the limitations and futility of values confined to life on earth. Inevitably, his gropings for the reason and purpose of life led him to God, and once he had made his choice God led him to a confessor—just as the impulses of the Holy Spirit have arranged our own particular parish priest, hospital chaplain, or religious as our confessor. With

the help of his confessor, Camillus converted from passive to active Catholicism and progressively his passionate nature became a singular zeal for Christ Crucified.

He prayed for graces and he worked on his 'natural' inclinations by the means common to us all: prayer, desire for holiness, spiritual reading, and frequent use of the Sacraments.

Three times he tried to abandon himself completely to Christ by entering the Capuchin novitiate, but his disease got worse and he left to go for medical treatment in Rome.

He spent a long time in hospital, and it was largely in his sickbed that his spiritual progress was made. He progressively became gentler, developed patience, and learned to make his suffering a means of uniting himself with Christ. He worked hard at seeing the good in all men, which led to him seeking and finding Christ in the patients around him. And as his love for them grew, so did his concern for their welfare.

A lack of love for their charges by the nurses and paid chaplains of the time resolved Camillus to form an Order devoted to help the sick in the spirit of Christ's love.

When he was well enough to leave the hospital, although his suffering from the disease continued, he studied for the priesthood (and was ordained by the English Bishop Goldwell, who was spending a short time in Rome). After initial trials and setbacks, the first congregation of the Servants of the Sick was confirmed by Pope Pius V in 1586.

Camillus set a standard of devotion which saw his community being called to hospitals and houses at all hours, day and night. His gentleness and devotion were as though each patient was Christ in his pain - as indeed each patient was, to Camillus. 'He suffered with them, consoled them and prayed with them', one biographer writes ... and he is waiting now, this minute, to do just that with those of us who approach him in prayer.

ST PAUL of THE CROSS was racked with bodily pain through the last fifty of his eighty-one years of life, and he so completely associated his sufferings with Christ's that his joy in Christ quickly grew to outshine his suffering.

As a child of devout middle-class parents in their home in northern Italy, he and his younger brother, John Baptist, had been well taught by their mother what we must all learn if we are to lose our pains in the balm of God's love: namely, that by accepting our pains, discomforts, slights, and sufferings as being God's will for us, we are, in effect, relieving Christ of this pain, this discomfort, this slight, this suffering. It is as though we are actually present as the Son of Man-bleeding, tired, weak, and rejected - is lumbering that heavy cross up that hill to Calvary. We are there; we go out from the crowd and we put ourselves under that heavy timber and take the weight. How relieved, with what thankful love, his haggard face looks to us, and what promise in his tired eyes! That is one way to see the surges of pain we feel: they are those rough corners of that heavy wood causing our hurt—and great indeed will be our reward from him whose suffering we are thus taking upon ourselves.

This is one way of looking at 'Suffer with Christ and for Christ if you would reign with Christ', as the Imitation of Christ puts it. It needs, as often as the priest can visit, the strength and nourishment of frequent Holy Communion, prayer which becomes a life of prayer, and as the soul thus enlarges, so the pain and the suffering diminish ... as it did with Paul of the Cross.

His offering of his pain to God began when he was over thirty years old. The pains that were to gnaw at him for fifty years were planted when he was serving as a soldier in the army into which he enlisted in 1714. But also planted in him were the seeds of hunger for holiness.

He came back from crusading against the Turks and left the army in 1720 in compliance with a growing compulsion to give himself wholly to influencing people in Christ's way.

As a layman, even before he was ordained priest, he began to preach the Passion, and his love of the crucified Jesus so grew that the impulses of the Holy Spirit—it is said in vivid visions—led him to the work of founding a congregation devoted to Our Lord's sufferings.

The Order is today known as the Passionists.

But it was not easy.

Paul of the Cross was forever saying 'God does us great honour when he ordains that we should tread the same road which was trodden by his only-begotten Son—the road of suffering—and he was given opportunities beyond his bodily pains to make those words meaningful. His trust in God was subjected to severe trials. He had been shown clearly by the Holy Spirit that he was required to form an Order, but the Pope would not give him an audience. The

men he gathered to form a founding congregation all deserted him—with the single exception of his brother, John Baptist. The sense of defeat and discouragement on top of his physical sufferings must have been almost unbearable, but Paul accepted it as God's sign that he was not yet holy enough, and he and his brother persevered by withdrawing to a lonely place to live a life of prayer, fasting, and penance.

They lived thus, as hermits, for seventeen years, emerging only occasionally to preach the Passion. Then, at last, God rewarded their constancy, and moved his Pope to give approbation for the Order. The first house of the Rule was set up on the spot where the two brothers had lived as hermits, at Monte Argentario, and the Order, as we know, flourished on after Paul died—in Rome, as the gospel Passion was being read to him, in 1775.

Through patience, perseverance, prayer, the help and intercession of his chosen saints, and frequent reception of the Eucharist, Paul of the Cross so grew in love of Christ that he transcended bodily suffering, and 'lived by the Spirit'. (Gal 5.16-26).

He did nothing that we cannot do ... deliberate effort to aspire to being inspired, as the apostle Paul puts it. 'May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son'. (Col. 1. 11-13).

The Real Presence of Christ in the Sacrament of Holy Communion was the only friend one of our saints had for most of her patient, persevering, suffering life. ST GERMAINE of PIBRAC knew it all: the pains of prolonged illness, accompanied by the neglect and thoughtlessness of others to a degree that must move the hardest heart to pity.

Poor, dear little Germaine! What an awful life she did have. And yet, she showed us all the way to accept all that comes our way with that gentle patience which promises such rewards when our life is completed.

Germaine was born at Pibrac in France in 1579, the only daughter of a farm labourer by the name of Cousin. Baby Cousin was born with a withered right hand, and her health was frail from the beginning.

While she was still an infant, her mother died and the child soon had a stepmother who was despicably cruel to her: never allowing her to play with her stepbrothers or sisters, forever scolding, hitting, and making the sick little girl do scullery and other chores; carrying food to meals but never being allowed to eat with the family, given only what was left over. and some days nothing at all. For a bed she had straw on a stone floor under some stairs, and even this she was made to earn by going out to the fields in all weathers to tend the flocks.

To the unhappiness of her home was added the cruelty of the villagers. who ridiculed her for her deformity and constant illnesses.

Germaine shows us that nothing need be a deterrent to turning our suffering into a vocation ... by inviting God's graces through prayer and conscious effort to desire holiness; by making room for graces by ousting such 'natural' inclinations as resentment, envy, self-pity, or complaint. It is thus that, like Germaine, we go on to grow in Christ. And as he grew in her, together they transcended the sickness of her body and the misery of her surroundings.

By the time she was in her early teens, the attitude of the villagers began to change. The unhappiness and cruelties of her home and the pains and illnesses of her body were with her all her life, but to the villagers her gentleness and her readiness to do all she could to be of help to them and surely, their 'sensing' of Christ within her melted their derisive attitude and, as the Roman Missal so beautifully puts it: 'The crown of tribulation has blossomed into a diadem of glory and a garland of joy.'

Germaine's 'garland of joy' was the children who, in time, gathered round her to listen as she told them of Christ and his mother and his saints, and her gentle goodness was something the children never forgot.

In her twenty-two years she learned something that is very precious in God's sight. She learned patience and perseverance in suffering for Christ's sake. While on earth the effort she made won for her the gifts of spiritual wisdom and understanding, and in Heaven now she can the better help us rise above our sufferings ... help us to understand that God, through his apostle Paul, is addressing us personally when he says: 'God is at work in you ... Do all things without grumbling or questioning'. (Phil 2.13-14).

This could well be our daily meditation. It has great depth and it gives great strength and promise, and as we advance in the understanding of it so too will we come to know why so many of the saints not only joyfully bore their diseases and disabilities, pains and handicaps, but begged God to send them more suffering ...

When ST JOHN OF THE CROSS—whose sufferings went far beyond sickness and bodily pain to the ultimate human wretchedness of prolonged spiritual aridity—was asked in a vision by our Lord, ‘John, what shall I give you for all you have given me?’ the saint promptly answered, ‘Lord, to suffer and be ill-treated for your sake’.

ST VERONICA GIULIANI, whose whole life was one long succession of sufferings from the Five Wounds, the stigmata, which persisted year after year and caused her great pain, had visions of Our Lord carrying his cross; offering her the cup of his sufferings. She gladly accepted, and henceforth never tired of exclaiming:

‘Blessed be God! Everything seems little that is suffered for his love. Blessed be the simple cross! Blessed be pure suffering!’

ST MARY MAGDALEN DEI PAZZI, who at the age of eighteen took as her motto ‘Let me suffer or let me die’, and henceforth did suffer extremely, said: ‘The experience of pain is something so fine and precious that the divine Word, who knew all the joys of Paradise but was not clothed with this ornament of sorrow, came down from Heaven to seek it upon earth.’

Or did you know that the great-spirited ST TERESA OF AVILA did her immense work of restoring the Carmelites to the original discipline and observances (which survive today in the Order of Discalced Carmelites) in the face of both the fierce opposition of the lax members of the Order and of her own body’s constant illness? For more than twenty years she could not keep down any food until late in the day, and had to make herself sick with a feather at night so that she could take Holy Communion in the morning. And, she writes in her ‘Life’—‘I think I am never quite free, either, from aches and pains, which are sometimes very severe, especially around the heart ... fainting fits, which were at one time continuous ... paralysis ... attacks of fever that I used to have so often.

‘But I take my complaints so lightly now that often I rejoice in them, believing that the Lord is in some way served by them.’

The medicine she recommends is constant mental prayer: ‘So long as the soul is a loving one it is always possible to pray by offering up the distraction itself and remembering him for whom we are suffering it. At the same time we must resign ourselves to it ... With a little care we may find great blessings at times when the Lord sends us trials ...’

ST JOHN CHRYSOSTOM said: ‘You say you cannot be silent when stung by pain. I would not have you silent. I wish you to give thanks. It is this which repels Satan and brings you help from God.’

ST ARCADIUS, whose physical sufferings reached the extreme limits of sheer agony, kept repeating, ‘Lord, teach me your wisdom’, and to the people he said: ‘All that I suffer is nothing. If only you knew the God who strengthens me. I am glad to suffer for him, whose love cannot grow cold. I shall soon be with him forever.’

ST MARGARET OF CORTONA, in penance for an earlier life of shame, punished herself so severely by fast, self-denial, and heavy work that her withered body suffered continuously from sores and the cold. But it did not bother her. ‘Her soul was afire with divine love’ ... and on and on, there is no end to the saints who besought God to give them what we have been given—disease, sickness, deformities, pain, suffering.

### **Why?**

It is something which all who persevere in trying to abandon themselves to God, in directing every effort to being what Christ asks us to be, are brought to understand—and which no man can understand until he has set his course towards living in, and with, and for Christ.

It is loving God so that we want to give him something. When you meditate on it you inevitably realize that there is precious little we can give God. He owns it all. We have our effort to give. We have restraints to give. Look where you will, there is little else but effort and restraint which really comes from us. We have just one other thing to give, and that is the greatest gift of all—thankfulness to God for all things, especially for pain and suffering. You cannot offer any sacrifice so pleasing to him.

‘Present tribulation is the way to glory—the way to the kingdom’, says St Bernard.

### **How do we go about it?**

We must begin with a clean-cut decision to live only for God. ‘Live in the world’, says St John of the Cross, ‘as if God and your soul only were in it.’

Our manual for daily living is the New Testament and, surely, the Imitation of Christ. Thus are we able to ask ourselves of each action, each thought, 'Is this what Christ wants?' Love of Christ grows as we meditate on his life. Thus we exert restraint in overcoming that in us which is displeasing to Him, and effort in further developing that which is desirable.

We must begin with patience—and we must cultivate detachment. We need help, and we receive it from our saints, from the Holy Spirit in response to our prayer, from the cleansing and the spiritual induction we receive in the Sacrament of Penance, and, above all else, from the growth of Christ in us, nurtured and nourished by frequent reception of the Holy Eucharist.

At last we shall learn to love the sufferings which liken us to the Passion of Our Lord and our God, and we shall say with St Bonaventure: 'If we have you, O Christ, what more do we need? Are you not enough for him who loves?'

A tall order? Well. I personally know more than a dozen people, including those who started from the bleak, near-total ignorance of atheism or the murky gloom of agnosticism, who have reached remarkable levels of spiritual enlightenment. It is not just a change or a difference that has appeared in them. It is, as Our Lord promised, complete and total rebirth.

They demonstrate that what we are about is not something to be wandered into. What is required from us is a wrench, a distinct committal. And 'he who endures to the end will be saved'. (Mt 24.13).

In addition to the saints, we have the guaranteed help of Our Lady, of whom the Memorare promises 'that it is a thing unheard of that anyone ever had recourse to your protection, implored your help, or sought your intercession, and was left forsaken'. And of St Joseph, of whom the great St Teresa of Avila promises: 'I do not remember to this day ever having asked him for anything that he did not grant me ... I wish that I could persuade everyone to venerate this glorious saint, for I have great experience of the blessings that he obtains from God ... he gives very real help to the souls who commend themselves to him.'

ST JOHN VIANNEY said: 'Private prayer is like straw scattered about: if you set it on fire it makes a lot of little flames. But if these straws be gathered into a bundle and lit, you get a mighty fire blazing in the sky. Public prayer is like that.'

We, the house-bound, the bedridden, the chair-bound., cannot get to a church ... but we can bring all our 'little straws' together by making it the unyielding rule of our day that we all pray at the same time every day. What better than the greatest prayer of all time—that given us by the Son of Man personally?

At the stroke of noon every day, let us begin with 'Our Father ...', followed by the Memorare, and concluded by a little meditation on Our Lord's Passion and a chat with our chosen saint(s).

You can be certain that others are doing exactly what you are doing at that exact time, and our 'little straws' are a mighty fire of prayer going up to our God in a glorious PRAYER OF THE SICK.

\*\*\*\*\*