



Sister M. Camillus Erb
May 25, 1922 - June 16, 2011

In the morning of June 16, 2011, Sister Camillus Erb was called home. The Irish among us think that Sister Virginia Marie Waudby helped her get there as she had so many times during their many years together. As always, Gina knew the way.

Sister Camillus was born in Pittsburgh to Philomena and William Erb. Her mother named her Faith Elaine and she was big sister to brother, William (Bill) and Leo (Lee). She graduated from Saint Luke's grade and high schools and then enrolled in the Pittsburgh Hospital School of Nursing. When she completed her studies in 1943, she enlisted in the Navy Nurse Corps. She was our Navy nurse. Anyone who knew Sister Camillus was surprised by her enlistment. She was not a risk taker; she knew the dangers of war because her 21 year old brother Bill had been killed the day after his unit landed in France. Yet, she followed her recruiter's suggestion and drank three milkshakes so that she could meet the weight requirement of the Navy. Our beautiful Navy nurse was very thin.

After boot camp in Portsmouth, Virginia, she was assigned to the Navy's receiving hospitals in Philadelphia and then in San Diego. She cared for the Navy nurses who had been repatriated after imprisonment by the Japanese. These nurses were the first women prisoners of war. She also cared for young sailors who had been captured and/or injured during combat. Many of them suffered from what we now call, post traumatic stress syndrome. These patients influenced her life and her practice.

On her discharge physical, she was found to have a severe form of thyroid disease, what the old medical texts called "Grave's disease". Although she would have thyroid surgery, radiation and medication, she continued to express, until her later years, the activity, energy and temperament so often associated with under treated hyperthyroidism.

During her convalescence after surgery, Sister Ann Matthia Gorham asked her to come and help out at Roselia Foundling. Someone had resigned and they needed help with the babies. It was at the Foundling that she decided to enter the Sisters of Charity. She came to Seton Hill on March 25, 1948; she formed a group of one. Later, she was "grouped" with Sister Bernadine Lauer, Sister Adele Rodgers and Sister Catherine Ann Zentner. They celebrated their golden jubilee together.

On habit day, she was given the name, Camillus, after the colorful 16th century Italian soldier nurse and patron of the sick. Her new name was very special to her and she consistently advised people to pray to Saint Camillus. She and her friend, Sister Mary Bede McLaughlin, visited the shrine of Saint Camillus in the church of Mary Magdalene in Rome. She met a Camillian priest there, who gave her a medal of Saint Camillus which she treasured.

Our Sister Camillus' field of nursing was the care of children. She was a pediatric supervisor and sometimes an obstetrical supervisor at Pittsburgh, Providence and again at Pittsburgh hospitals. She was missioned to Jeannette District Memorial Hospital in 1968. She earned a B.S.N. from Duquesne University in 1961 and a M.E.D. in Nursing Administration from the University of Pittsburgh in 1966.

Sister Camillus was very energetic; she had a good sense of humor and could laugh at herself. She worked very hard. In the fifties and sixties, nursing students provided the staffing from 7:00 p.m. until 7:00 a.m. in the nation's hospitals. At Pittsburgh Hospital, when the junior and senior nursing students needed help or advice,

they paged the supervisor. Most supervisors called or took the elevator to the unit. Sister Camillus ran up and down the steps. She would always check back several times to make sure that the problem had been resolved and the patient was comfortable. At Pittsburgh Hospital, she and Sister Catherine Laboure McCann took turns being on call; they were awakened if a patient needed to have an “off hours” electro cardiogram, and EKG. At night, Sister Camillus was afraid to walk through the tunnel connecting the nurses’ home to the hospital. She would run. I used to think that she would have frightened anyone who was loitering in the tunnel.

During the mid-sixties, as the neighborhood of Homewood-Brushton changed, police dogs were frequently in Pittsburgh Hospital’s emergency room waiting area in the evening. Sister Camillus loved the dogs and would go to the sisters’ dining room, looking for food for them. She often gave them her dinner.

The introduction of pre-mixed bottles of formula, Similac’s formula, coincided with the opening of the new wing of Pittsburgh Hospital in 1962. Sister Camillus was featured on Pittsburgh’s TV channels talking about the maternity services to offered in the new wing. She was very photogenic and obviously pleased that Pittsburgh would be the first hospital to offer babies and their mothers’ bottled formula. You often saw her picture in the Jeannette and Greensburg newspapers when Jeannette Hospital opened a new service, installed some high technology equipment or announced the birth of the first bicentennial baby. Earlier in her career, the Navy had selected, then Faith Erb, to be the poster girl in the United States Navy nurse’s recruitment campaign.

After her retirement from Jeannette District Memorial Hospital in 1978, Sister Camillus joined her friend, Sister Virginia Marie, in Washington, D.C. Our Navy nurse loved the monuments, the military parades, the fireworks, the musical events on the Mall and the National Shrine where she prayed to Saint Camillus and lit candles for anyone in need of prayers.

She volunteered at The Catholic University of America and was placed in charge of the second hand book store in the Mullen Library. She developed a clientele of philosophy and theology students and some of their teachers. She saved books for her special customers, students from the developing countries of the world. She loved the honor system in the book store. She told students that if she were not there, they could take the book and put the money in the box on the wall. She, herself, was probably the store’s best customer. She would bring books home to each of us.

Along the way, she also collected a series of stray animals. She ran a Saint Francis rescue center in our backyard for dogs and cats. Three of the four animals that came from Washington, D.C. to Pittsburgh were found, fed and nurtured by Sister Camillus.

She loved her family, her brother Lee who died on Labor Day in 2010, her sister-in-law, Joy, and their seven children. She delighted in the letters and calls from home. She treasured her mother’s brother, Uncle George, Uncle Leo and Uncle Eddie. She valued her cousins, Edna Simpkins and Virginia and Father George Leech.

She came to her new home, Caritas Christi, in 2008 after a bad fall in Maryland. She liked Caritas Christi. She liked the coffee and the food, although she did not eat very much of it. She was grateful to the nurses who cared for her in Elizabeth Seton Hall and on the second floor. Another bad fall on Easter Sunday evening foreshadowed her leaving for her real home last Thursday.

Dear Camille, almost everyone that you loved is in heaven. In this beautiful week between the feasts of Pentecost and the Holy Trinity, there is a great rejoicing in heaven. There is music too, maybe even John Denver. Your life on earth was filled with activity and the concern and care for others. Enjoy paradise and rest in peace.

*Funeral Liturgy Reflection
~Sister Rosemary Donley
June 21, 2011*