



## Sister Pat (Camillus) Robb CJ

1936-2022

edited from Sister Pat's personal memoirs by Sister Gemma Simmonds CJ

Pat was born in 1936 in Penang of a Scottish father and an English mother both of whom had served in World War I. Her father died in Malaya when Pat was only two, leaving her mother to move to a family farm in Somerset, where little Pat was soon in her element, riding horses and tractors and learning to love all things green and growing. Her mother was called up for nursing service in WWII, so Pat was sent off to boarding school aged six. The end of war brought a further move to Cambridge, where an angry, sulking, rebellious young teenager (Pat's own description) was taken on in Paston House (now St. Mary's School) by the then headmistress, Sister Christopher Angell, still alive and on mission in Zimbabwe aged 106. Sister Christopher saw Pat as a challenge - she was not the only person to share this view of Pat in her lifetime... Paston House was Pat's eighth school, but she knew at once that a Mary Ward school was different from the 'survival of the fittest' culture she had met elsewhere. Renouncing her original ambition to become a stable girl to the racing trainer in Royston, she followed her mother and chose nursing at the Middlesex Hospital in London. Pat loved nursing and the independent life of London with its smoke-filled coffee bars, skiffle music and mixed hockey played with young doctors. There were tensions around her interest in Catholicism both with

her staunch Anglican mother and with a young farmer boyfriend who asked her to choose between him or becoming a Catholic. But neither mother nor boyfriend persuaded her, and Pat was received into the Catholic Church, making her First Holy Communion in the Cambridge Convent Chapel with Mrs Hawke, mother of Sr. Anna & Nonie Hawke, who taught Maths at St. Mary's, as her godmother.

Pat became a staff nurse, but further adventures called, and she sold her Lambretta scooter and boarded a ship bound for Australia, where she found a job in the mountains of New South Wales, covering everything from children's ward, A & E, maternity and the operating theatre, treating horrific accidents among men digging roads and dams out of the side of the mountains. She went on to South Africa in 1960, at a time of appalling violence and racial segregation, often finding herself sitting with the black Africans in church being glared at by white people. Deciding to do a midwifery training in order to work in a bush mission hospital, she boarded a ship home, where she was pestered by two Irish nuns to visit their convent to see 'what it's like to be a nun'. Pat shuddered at the thought and avoided them for the rest of the journey, but to get them off her back, and thinking that a teaching order was a greater sacrifice, she said she was entering the sisters from her old school. True to her upbringing, she then felt she had to keep her word. Mrs Robb was distraught when she broke the news, but the Cambridge community were so good to her that in later years she was to say that she hadn't lost a daughter but had gained several. As anyone who knew her would understand, Pat found novitiate life very constricting, so she was delighted when she was sent to St. Mary's School in Shaftesbury after her vows, heading for the open country and the wildlife with alacrity. As Sister Camillus she spent eighteen years there as school nurse, starting the Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme, running the Scottish reels club with the help of its star dancer, now the abbess of a Benedictine monastery, and being chiefly remembered by the alumnae who have paid tribute to her on Facebook for riding their horses round the hockey pitch, roaring round in a tractor and teaching them to play rugger touch, despite the disapproval of many parents. But her missionary vocation never left her, and she returned to midwifery in London, finally landing in Zimbabwe, in a hospital with over two hundred beds, serving an enormous outlying rural area.

Reverting to her baptismal name, Pat moved on to the municipal clinic in the desperate poverty of Amaveni township where her interests in justice and peace were roused by the torture and bullying she witnessed under Robert Mugabe's supporters. A call came from Mozambique, to Chimoio, on the border with Zimbabwe. Built for 25,000 people, Chimoio now held 250,000, mostly refugees from the civil war, squatting on the edge of the town without sewerage or shelter. She concentrated on Mother/Child health but was also dealing with high numbers of mutilated victims of violence and people dying of HIV/AIDS. In one of many stand-offs with authority in her life, she was deported from Mozambique after denouncing corruption within the local charity and government sectors but was asked to go to Angola with the charity CONCERN. She flew there to find that the CONCERN office had been bombed during the night

and all documents had been destroyed. Nothing daunted, she set up some feeding centres with Médecins sans Frontières. 100 people a week were dying of starvation and related diseases there under terrible living conditions and she was very busy, with shelling all night and drunk and drugged soldiers manning the many roadblocks as she and her companions drove through the mine fields. Asked if she would do similar work in the camps surrounding Rwanda, she became the camp administrator in Tanzania in 1993, moving on to Goma in the Congo and on into Rwanda and then Burundi to a camp which they had to evacuate five times in the six months she was there. Years later she and I went to see the film *Hotel Rwanda*. She was very silent on the way home, later weeping as she spoke of the horrors she had witnessed during the genocide.

Pat moved to yet another war zone in Sierra Leone, organizing logistics to turn a disused university into homes for hundreds of people, helped by a Muslim cook called Alfred and a Christian guard called Mohammed. Her career in African war zones ended with brutal suddenness when a bout of cerebral malaria necessitated her repatriation to England. Here she found a volunteering role in the Cardinal Hume Homeless Centre, with one day a week in a legal aid firm involved with Human Rights for the Traveller community. It was the beginning of her life as a tireless campaigner for justice and peace that is acknowledged in Prof. Anna Rowlands' recent book on Catholic Social Teaching which carries a dedication to Pat. It says, 'She represented the persistent widow, the virtuous and difficult woman who faithfully believes in a truth beyond mere power and witnesses to it until justice is rendered. She stands for a generation of women, written out of the magisterial pages of the tradition, but who have led and inspired social renewal.'<sup>1</sup>

Conventional community life was not for Pat after her long years under fire and in May 1999 she moved to a flat in Cambridge, working first at Whitemoor High Security Prison and then in chaplaincy at the Oakington Immigration Detention Centre until its closure in 2010. Well into advanced old age she involved herself with Justice and Peace work through CAFOD and other NGOs, campaigning on behalf of refugees, several of whom became part of her extended family, as well as keeping up the care of her beloved allotment. At the end of her memoirs Pat writes, 'God has been VERY good to me'. She, in her turn, fought the good fight on behalf of so many in need of a doughty champion. We can imagine her welcome in Heaven, 'Well done, good and faithful servant – there are horses, motorbikes and gardens galore, just waiting for you to enjoy them...'

May she rest in peace at last after her extraordinary life and rise in glory.

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Rowlands, *Towards a Politics of Communion: Catholic Social Teaching in Dark Times*, (T & T. Clark, London, 2021)