

ST RITA OF CASCIA, WIDOW (AD 1457)

In the year 1381 there was born in a peasant home at Roccaporena in the central Apennines a little girl who, as an exemplary daughter, wife and religious, was destined to attain to great heights of holiness in this life, and afterwards to merit from countless grateful souls by her intercession in Heaven the title of “the saint of the impossible and the advocate of desperate cases.”

The child of her parents’ old age, Rita—as she was named—showed from her earliest years extraordinary piety and love of prayer. She had set her heart upon dedicating herself to God in the Augustinian convent at Cascia, but when her father and mother decreed that she should marry, she sorrowfully submitted, deeming that in obeying them she was fulfilling God’s will. Her parents’ choice was an unfortunate one. Her husband proved to be brutal, dissolute and so violent that his temper was the terror of the neighbourhood. For eighteen years with unflinching patience and gentleness Rita bore with his insults and infidelities. As with a breaking heart she watched her two sons fall more and more under their father’s evil influence, she shed many tears in secret and prayed for them without ceasing. Eventually there came a day when her husband’s conscience was touched, so that he begged her forgiveness for all the suffering he had caused her but shortly afterwards he was carried home dead, covered with wounds. Whether he had been the aggressor or the victim of a vendetta she never knew. Poignancy was added to her grief by the discovery that her sons had vowed to avenge their father’s death, and in an agony of sorrow she prayed that they might die rather than commit murder. Her prayer was answered. Before they had carried out their purpose they contracted an illness which proved fatal. Their mother nursed them tenderly and succeeded in bringing them to a better mind, so that they died forgiving and forgiven.

Left alone in the world, Rita’s longing for the religious life returned, and she tried to enter the convent at Cascia. She was informed, however, to her dismay that the constitutions forbade the reception of any but virgins. Three times she made application, begging to be admitted in any capacity, and three times the prioress reluctantly refused her. Nevertheless her persistence triumphed; the rules were relaxed in her favour and she received the habit in the year 1413.

In the convent St Rita displayed the same submission to authority which she had shown as a daughter and wife. No fault could be found with her observance of the rule, and when her superior, to try her, bade her water a dead vine in the garden, she not only complied without a word, but continued day after day to tend the old stump. On the other hand, where latitude was allowed by the rule—as in the matter of extra austerities—she was pitiless to herself. Her charity to her neighbour expressed itself especially in her care for her fellow religious during illness and for the conversion of negligent Christians, many of whom were brought to repentance by her prayers and persuasion. All that she said or did was prompted primarily by her fervent love of God, the ruling passion of her life. From childhood she had had a special devotion to the sufferings of our Lord, the contemplation of which would sometimes send her into an ecstasy, and when in 1441 she heard an eloquent sermon on the crown of thorns from St. James della Marca, a strange physical reaction seems to have followed. While she knelt, absorbed in prayer, she became acutely conscious of pain—as of a thorn which had detached itself from the crucifix and embedded itself in her forehead. It developed into an open wound which suppurated and became so offensive that she had to be secluded from the rest. We read that the wound was healed for a season, in answer to her prayers, to enable her to accompany her sisters on a pilgrimage to Rome during the year of the jubilee, 1450, but it was renewed after her return and remained with her until her death, obliging her to live practically as a recluse.

During her later years St. Rita was afflicted also by a wasting disease, which she bore with perfect resignation. She would never relax any of her austerities or sleep on anything softer than rough straw. She died on May 22, 1457, and her body has remained incorrupt until modern times. The roses which are St. Rita's emblem and which are blessed in Augustinian churches on her festival refer to an old tradition. It is said that when the saint was nearing her death she asked a visitor from Roccaporena to go to her old garden and bring her a rose. It was early in the season and the friend had little expectation of being able to gratify what she took to be a sick woman's fancy. To her great surprise, on entering the garden, she saw on a bush a rose in full bloom. Having given it to St. Rita she asked if she could do anything more for her "Yes," was the reply. "Bring me two figs from the garden." The visitor hastened back and discovered two ripe figs on a leafless tree.

The evidence upon which rests the story of St Rita as it is popularly presented cannot be described as altogether satisfactory. The saint died in 1457, but the first biography of which anything is known, written by John George de Amicis, only saw the light in 1600 and we can learn little or nothing of the sources from which it was compiled. A considerable number of lives have appeared in modern times, but in spite of the diligence of their various authors they add hardly anything in the way of historical fact to the slender sketch which may be read in the *Acta Sanctorum* (May, vol. v), which is derived mainly from the seventeenth century life by Cavallucci. There are also many chronological problems, which, *pace* Father Vannuteli, still remain unsettled. In English we have a *Life of St Rita of Cascia*, by R. Conolly (1903), and *Our Own Saint Ritta*, by M.J. Corcoran (1919). Of the numerous Italian biographies those by P. Marabottini (1923) and by L. Vannuteli (1925) seem most in favour.

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