

ST. RITA OF CASCIA

SAINT OF THE IMPOSSIBLE

And Model of Maidens, Wives, Mothers, Widows and Nuns

By

Fr. Joseph Sicardo, O.S.A.

Translated from the Spanish by

Fr. Dan J. Murphy, O.S.A.

*“She hath opened her hand to the needy,
and stretched out her hands to the poor . . .
She hath opened her mouth to wisdom, and
the law of clemency is on her tongue. . . . Her
children rose up, and called her blessed: her
husband, and he praised her.”*

—Proverbs 31:20, 26, 28

TAN Books
Charlotte, North Carolina

Cum Permissu Superiorum: N. J. Murphy, O.S.A.
Provincial

Nihil Obstat: J. F. Green, O.S.A.
Censor Librorum

Imprimatur: † George W. Mundelein, D.D.
Archbishop of Chicago

Originally published by D. B. Hansen as *Life of Sister St. Rita of Cascia*.

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Retypeset and republished in 1990 by TAN Books.

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Library of Congress Catalog Card No.: 90-71100

ISBN: 978-0-89555-407-9

Printed and bound in the United States of America.

TAN Books
Charlotte, North Carolina
www.TANBooks.com

2011

To the Very Rev. J. F. Green, O.S.A.,
whose pious and untiring zeal
has done so much
to spread devotion to St. Rita, O.S.A.,
of Cascia, this volume
is affectionately dedicated.

—The Translator

In compliance with the decree of Pope Urban VIII, we hereby assert that we do not intend to attach to the circumstances narrated in this Life any significance other than that belonging to historical facts.

—Fr. Dan J. Murphy, O.S.A.

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

The Church is a faithful custodian of the "Lives of the Saints," of those books which contain the wonderful and glorious deeds of her children who have lived and died in the odor of sanctity. And she looks on every "Life of a Saint" as a guidebook pointing out the way to Heaven to all Christians, who are only travelers on the way to their true home. After the Bible and the Catechism there is no book more precious in the eyes of Mother Church than a "Life of a Saint."

It is the dearest wish of Mother Church that her children should frequently read the lives of the Saints; by so doing they gradually become acquainted with a select society to which, in a great measure, they will be forced to raise the standard of their daily lives. Our Holy Father St. Augustine is a striking example of what the reading of the lives of the Saints may do. A friend of his, Alipius by name, gave him the life of St. Anthony the Abbot. Augustine read it, and was so extremely affected by what he read that it was one main cause of his conversion.

Looking down the long calendar of saints, glancing carefully over the Church's long honor list of men and women whose names were held in veneration in their days, we find no name crowned with a greater halo of glory and honor than that of St. Rita,

the humble Augustinian nun of Cascia, now venerated under the singular title of the *Saint of the Impossible*. It is more than 450 years since St. Rita departed this life to be united forever to her Lord and spouse Jesus Christ, and yet her name is still held in benediction, not only among the faithful of Italy, her native country, but also among the faithful of the rest of Europe, who vie with the people of South and North America in honoring and venerating our illustrious Saint.

Among the many magnificent "Lives of St. Rita" written by the Italian and Spanish Augustinians, we prefer that written by our brother religious, Father Joseph Sicardo. As his book has had a large propaganda in Spain, the Philippine Islands and in Spanish America, we have hopes that the same book, garbed in an English dress, will help to keep alive that fire of devotion which now burns in the hearts of so many clients of St. Rita in North America. That our translation of Father Sicardo's *Life of St. Rita* may have the result of further increasing not only the veneration, but also the number, of the clients of our sister, St. Rita, is our only wish and ambition.

—DAN J. MURPHY, O.S.A.

St. Rita's Monastery
Chicago, Illinois
Feast of St. Agatha, 1916

PUBLISHER'S PREFACE

Although devotion to St. Rita of Cascia has unfortunately waned in recent years (along with private devotions in general), St. Rita has traditionally been one of the most popular saints in the Church.

St. Rita was canonized in the year 1900, and that period of Church history saw a great flowering of devotion to her. The priest who for decades supervised the St. Rita devotions at her shrine in Chicago (see p. 176) told us that great crowds would attend these devotions, with people sometimes lined up down the street. The present book notes (p. 177) that every year on St. Rita's feast day, devotions were held over and over from early morning until late in the evening. Also, at this period "Rita" was a popular name for Catholic parents to name their newborn daughters.

This particular book was originally published in 1916 by D. B. Hansen & Sons, a Chicago church goods dealer now known as The House of Hansen. The store owners graciously offered to let us republish the book. Several years ago they chose St. Rita as the patron saint of their store, and they have tried to stock items imported from her shrine in Cascia.

Recent writings on St. Rita point out that little documentation on the Saint exists, and that most of

what there is does not date back to St. Rita's own lifetime. Nevertheless, the classic stories on St. Rita's life have been handed down over a period of centuries, and they are in essential agreement with what documentation does exist. Moreover, one must beware of discrediting oral traditions, as if a tradition would become true only after being written down.

Like St. Jude, St. Rita is known as a saint of powerful intercession in very difficult situations. St. Jude is known as the "Patron of Hopeless Cases," St. Rita as the "Saint of the Impossible." We are pleased at this time to reissue this life of St. Rita of Cascia, newly retypeset, in the hope that it may contribute to a rebirth of devotion to her—and to a shower of many graces being received through her generous intercession.

—The Publisher
August 6, 1990

CHAPTER 1

UMBRIA, CASCIA AND ITS GREATNESS

IF YOU take a glance at the map of Italy, you will observe that the province of Umbria is set, like a gem, in the center of the Italian peninsula, which has the appearance of an elongated boot dipping down into the Mediterranean Sea.

The capital of Umbria is Perugia, a remarkably beautiful city, situated on a hill on the right of the Tiber. Among its many stately and majestic edifices, Perugia possesses a magnificent cathedral, built in the 14th century, that contains paintings by Barroccio, Manni and Signorelli. Attached to the cathedral is a valuable library, rich in works and manuscripts, among which is a codex of the Gospel of St. Luke, of the 6th century.

The inhabitants of Umbria are descendants of a long line of ancient and honorable ancestors. They are a God-fearing and God-loving people, and their proudest boast is that they have preserved the Faith "once given to the Saints."

Travelers and pilgrims who have visited the province of Umbria are most emphatic and enthusiastic in praise of this picturesque wonderland, whose matchless blue skies and delightful climate, its rugged hills and smiling valleys, its fertile soil

and its abundance of luscious fruits are sufficient proofs that bountiful nature has bestowed, with lavish hands, its choicest gifts on this garden spot of the Italian peninsula, whose native charms are the pride and boast of an admiring world. Truly may it be said of Umbria: "Beauty's home is surely there."

If we pass from the order of nature to the order of grace, Umbria becomes a shrine, so to speak, or in other words, a holy land, because it is the birthland of many illustrious saints whose names are the ornaments of Italy and glory and honor of the Catholic Church.

What land under Heaven's dome can lay claim to a galaxy of saints like St. Benedict, St. Francis and St. Clare, both of Assisi? Time has not decreased the holy fame of these saints; on the contrary, time has augmented the glory and veneration of Saints Benedict, Francis and Clare. Their shrines are visited yearly by numerous travelers and pilgrims who are led, not by curiosity, but by an ardent faith, to go and visit the shrines of those holy persons who, while on earth, were faithful servants of God.

However, the religious glory and fame of Umbria do not rest alone on the trinity of saints mentioned above. This blessed province is the happy mother of at least a dozen saints. The Order of St. Augustine numbers in its long calendar of saints eight who claim Umbria as their birthplace, among whom must be specially mentioned Sister St. Clare of Montefalco and Sister St. Rita of Cascia, called by Leo XIII, of happy memory, "*La perla preziosa de la Umbria*"—"Umbria's precious pearl."

About seventy-five miles from Rome, in the

southeastern part of Umbria, situated amid hills bordering the Apennines, is the ancient city of Cascia. Cascia was at one time the capital of a free and independent republic which consisted of four flourishing cities. Its inhabitants were a brave and sturdy people, and when in the year 1300 their rights and liberties were threatened by King Robert of Naples, the Cascians, who had tasted the sweets of freedom too long to tamely surrender their liberty, resisted with valor and bravery the King's army. Success crowned their vigorous resistance and the intrepid Cascians won a glorious and decisive victory over their powerful enemies.

There are extant pieces of money, coined when Cascia was at the zenith of its power. On these coins is stamped the escutcheon of Cascia, represented by a young and beautiful maiden, seated on a throne resting on two dragons' heads. The maiden holds a lily in her right hand, and in her left hand a serpent. These same heraldic arms may yet be seen emblazoned on one of the ancient gates which guarded the principal entrance to the once-famous city.

In the course of time, evil days fell upon the once-happy and prosperous republic. Wars, and especially civil wars, brought disaster and dissension, and where hitherto had reigned peace and prosperity there began a reign of gloom and despondency. Finding themselves reduced to such an unhappy and miserable condition, and fearful that they would fall under that most terrible of God's judgments—extermination—the inhabitants of Cascia and their equally unhappy neighbors placed them-

selves under the powerful protection of the Blessed Mother of God and became voluntary subjects of the Papal States.

The Cascia of today is, so to speak, but a shadow of what it was when "ancient and famous." At present it is but a small town. The number of its inhabitants does not exceed six hundred. Yet small as Cascia is as regards the number of its people, it has within its walls many monuments which are living witnesses of the ardent and lively faith of its pious population.

In Cascia there is a beautiful parish church, dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, and several houses of religious communities. The Augustinian Order has three communities in that little Italian town, one of friars and two of nuns. The friars' monastery, a fine building, is dedicated to our holy founder, St. Augustine. One of the nuns' convents, dedicated formerly to St. Mary Magdalen, is now called St. Rita's convent. The other religious house is dedicated to the glorious virgin St. Lucy, who suffered martyrdom during the fierce persecution of the cruel and impious Diocletian.

But though the religious fame and glory of Cascia might safely rest on St. Rita, whose name is a household word in Cascia, still, the archives of that blessed town are the proud possessors of records which mention the names of many holy men, the sanctity of whose lives perfumed, as it were, the moral atmosphere of Cascia. The following are the names of a few of those saintly servants of God of whom Cascia is the proud mother:

Blessed Giovanni of Castro Clavano.

Blessed Ugolino, O.S.A.

Blessed Simon, O.S.A.

Venerable Andrea of Muciafore, O.S.A.

However, among the many cedars of this Augustinian Lebanon, our Sister St. Rita towers above all others, and the story of her marvelous life and the many wonderful miracles wrought through her intercession after her death will convince the reader that God is indeed wonderful in His saints, and that St. Rita, the Augustinian nun of Cascia, is truly, as a venerating world calls her, the *Saint of the Impossible*.

CHAPTER 2

THE BIRTHPLACE AND PARENTS OF ST. RITA

ROCCA PORRENA is the name of a small village, or rather hamlet, about three miles from Cascia. It is situated near a small river, in a small valley, at the foot of a high cliff, which, separated from the adjoining mountains, has the appearance of a perfectly formed pine cone. There is a tradition that at the time of Our Lord's death on the hill of Calvary, an earthquake split the rocks of the mountains in the neighborhood of Cascia, and that this particular cliff remained completely detached from the mountains. On account of its rocky site, Porrena is called Rocca Porrena.

In this small village there lived, about the year 1309, a pious couple who, having plighted their troth at the foot of God's holy altar, consecrated every day of their wedded life to the service of God and to the practice of those virtues which are most pleasing to God. The names of that worthy couple were Antonio Lotti and Amata Ferri. Antonio was a native of Rocca Porrena; Amata was born at Fogliano, a pretty hamlet a short distance from Cascia.

Though possessing little of the world's riches, Antonio Lotti earned more than enough as a tiller

of the soil to enable himself and his good wife to live comfortably. Content with their humble lot, the happy couple felt no poverty, nor did they desire riches, and they gladly distributed to the poor and needy all they did not need for their own support and maintenance. Naturally, such generosity on the part of Antonio and Amata endeared them to the poor, the lips of many blessed them, and God, who rewards those who help His needy poor, showered His choicest spiritual blessings upon them.

Not only were Antonio and his pious wife generous to the poor and needy, but they were, in very fact, apostles placed by God in Rocca Porrena, and like apostles they endeavored to teach their neighbors by word and example that the only way to save their souls, that the only way to Heaven, was by fearing and loving God, as well as by avoiding and shunning sin and vice. The examples of the holy lives of Antonio and Amata, the peace and happiness that reigned in their humble home and the gladness and joy that were ever pictured on their countenances won many, first to admire and respect them, and then to imitate their holy manner of living. Truly may we say that the little vine-clad cottage of Rocca Porrena, the humble home of Antonio Lotti and Amata Ferri, must have been a holy and a heavenly home, and were the world blest with more such homes, the world would also be blest with more than one St. Rita.

The true story of the apostolic work of the parents of St. Rita is known to God alone. Nevertheless, one of its chapters has been handed down to us by zealous and trustworthy chroniclers of the Order

of St. Augustine. These chroniclers relate that the home of St. Rita's parents was truly a house of prayer, a sanctuary of holiness, and that their lives were in perfect conformity to the commandments of God and the Church. They meditated morning and night on the Passion of Jesus Christ, and both had a heartfelt devotion to the ever-blessed Virgin Mary, the Immaculate Mother of God. Antonio and Amata were known, for miles around Rocca Porrena, for their kindness and cheerfulness. Everywhere they went, they cast the radiance of their benevolence and soothed many an aching heart. In matters of confidence they vied even with the parish priest. Through their gentle influence family dissensions were healed, and through their prudent advice many indifferent souls were led back to the friendship of God.

Filled with the spirit and grace of God, there was born in the hearts of Antonio Lotti and Amata Ferri the apostolic zeal of saving souls. They hated and detested sin, but loved the sinner. Hence whenever occasion required it, they discovered a way to approach those who were guilty of grievous sins, without embarrassing or offending them. They reproved them with kindness and continued their gentle reproof until even the most hardened sinners were moved and learned to hate and be sorry for their sins and hastened to be reconciled with God in the Tribunal of Penance.

Many times when the parents of St. Rita happened to be in the company of some of their neighbors who, not satisfied with their lot in life, would begin to murmur against the Providence of God, the

pious couple would adroitly change the topic of conversation, and speak so feelingly of the Passion of Jesus Christ that their listeners would actually forget their trials and afflictions, and feel ashamed that they had not been willing to suffer a little for Him who suffered so much for them. Again, when malice, aided by calumny, had kindled the fires of discord and was fanning the flames of revenge in the hearts of individuals and families, it was then that Antonio Lotti and Amata Ferri employed a holy diplomacy that must have been inspired by Heaven. They silenced the voice of calumny, disarmed the desire of revenge, restored harmony among enemies, and even transformed enemies into ardent friends. Such apostolic zeal, such gentleness in reproofing sinners, such holy tact in banishing enmity and in settling quarrels and disputes, won for the parents of St. Rita the title: *Peacemakers of Jesus Christ*.

In Rocca Porrena there existed the custom of appointing every year a man and woman whose office or function was to settle the disputes and contentions that happened to arise among the inhabitants. This appointment was made on the first Sunday of Lent in the parish church, and by the parish priest, who was always very careful to make a prudent appointment. On account of their spotless reputation and well-deserved popularity, it was very natural that Antonio Lotti and his wife Amata were repeatedly appointed the *Peacemakers* of Rocca Porrena; and biographers tell us that their judgments were always accepted as if they were the judgments of God.

Living in the midst of a holy peace and happiness, the fruits of a truly Christian life, there was one joy lacking to the home of Antonio and his spouse. God had sent no child to bless their marriage, and though they had prayed often and fervently for this great blessing, God seemed to be deaf to their prayers. Disappointed as they naturally were because their prayers were not answered, they still kept on praying; and even when they had become advanced in years, they redoubled their prayers, so great were their hope and confidence in God. God rewarded their hope and confidence and bestowed on Amata Ferri the same favor He had bestowed on Anna, the mother of Samuel, and on Elizabeth, the mother of St. John the Baptist.

One night, while Amata was praying in her humble home, an angel appeared to her, in a vision, and told her that it was the will of God that there would be born of her a daughter who would be, from her very birth, marked with the *seal of sanctity*, gifted with *every virtue*, and that she was to be a *helper of the helpless*, an *advocate of the afflicted*, and a *guiding star in the firmament of the Church*. Amata was consoled and made happy by the words of the angel, and when she told the glad news to her husband Antonio, both joined in a heartfelt prayer of thanksgiving to God, who was pleased to bless their old age with such a *signal favor*.