

# **The Fifteen Thursdays of St. Rita**

## ***i Quindici Giovedì di Santa Rita***

Pray the prayers below on the fifteen Thursdays preceeding May 22, the Feast of St. Rita of Cascia.

This devotion will begin on a Thursday in February and continue on for fifteen Thursdays -- until the last Thursday before May 22. Each of these fifteen days begins with the same preparatory prayer followed by a reading on the life of St. Rita, a reflection about the lesson of that aspect of her life, and a final prayer.

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# First Thursday

## Preparatory Prayer

O my God, Whose splendor fills heaven and earth, I believe You are present here. I know You are near me and in me, immersed in my unworthiness. I deeply adore You. I thank You for the many grace You have accorded me and for all the graces, spiritual and material, You in Your fatherly goodness have prepared to strengthen my weakness. I ask You to forgive the many faults I have committed in the past. I beg the help of Your grace to keep me from offending You in the future and to remain faithful to the promises I have made to You many times. I sincerely renew them today. O Blessed Virgin, Saints in heaven, and especially you, St. Rita, help me make this Holy Exercise devoutly in order to obtain the light of mind and the strength of will to attain my eternal salvation. Amen.

Life: Rita...Or the Precious "Pearl" in a Desolate Land

Rita is a lovely name. It comes from the Latin "margarita" which means "pearl." It was a providential name, seeing that in the fifteenth century St. Rita was one of the most precious jewels of Holy Church. She lived five hundred years ago, at the time of St. Joan of Arc. When Joan was burned in Rouen, our Saint was probably about fifty years old.

In France there was a war that lasted a hundred years, the frightful rivalry between the Gasconians and the Burgundians. In Italy things were no better, as the Guelphs were for the Pope, the Ghibellines for the Emperor.

At Rita's birth, the Church herself was divided. The "Great Schism" had begun three years earlier. For forty years there were two Popes opposed to each other and even three at the end.

The Mohammedans profited. Four years before Rita's death they took Constantinople, and they spoke of nothing less than feeding their horses in the Basilica of St. Peter in Rome.

Everywhere there was shameless debauchery. The clergy themselves were very lax. Joan of Arc's trial was evidence of that.

It was then that God raised up a chosen soul, a truly precious "Pearl" in this desolate land.

Cascia was a small territorial district of Italy, situated in the Apennines. One of its hamlets was called Roccaporena. There Rita was born, the Saint we love.

## Reflection: The Value of Saints in Our Lives

If the Church of Jesus Christ is holy, one reason is that she has produced Saints in every age. Saints are the lightning rod of the world. Happily for us, we are not isolated individuals. We form an immense body called the "Mystical Body" of Christ. All of us are members.

Among us there is a "common union" called the "Communion of Saints," a union of all baptized people. If all lived up to their Baptism, that would be wonderful. Regrettably, in this large "Body" there are many spiritually sick members, who weaken the whole.

This weakness must be strengthened. And it is the Saints who are the ones charged with this function. By their merits they enable the Body to live in a more holy fashion. They also have a hand in keeping the world in existence. We ought to acknowledge what they do and, above all, thank them for it. Our first attitude toward them should therefore be an attitude of acknowledgment and our first prayer a prayer of praise and thanksgiving.

Not only are the Saints the counterbalance to the sins of the world; they are also the witnesses of the Gospel. Their existence is like a living lesson for all to see. They show us the human masterpiece that can be achieved by following Christ and taking His message and counsels seriously.

This is what St. Rita did: take the message seriously. In a century that was particularly callous, with some others like St. Joan of Arc, for example, she helped to save the people of her time: she showed them the way of the supernatural.

The first thing we should ask of her is to save us also and help us break away from whatever is irreligious in our daily life, We should moreover ask her to show us how we must change if we are to be really Christian.

#### **Prayer: For a Return to the Evangelical Life**

O St. Rita, the Providence of God raised you up in the fifteenth century to help save the Christian world from the lamentable state to which it had fallen. Look at our times. They are scarcely any better. Now and then we are divided by so much misunderstanding and, at times, hatred. For us also the peril is at our door because of our sins. By your merits, keep away from us and our children the frightful dangers of war. Our misery consists above all in being so far removed from true Christianity. Help us return to a life that is more in harmony with the Gospels. By your example, make us understand that we must be converted and live in charity as true baptized people of Jesus Christ. Amen.

## Second Thursday

### Preparatory Prayer

O my God, Whose splendor fills heaven and earth, I believe You are present here. I know You are near me and in me, immersed in my unworthiness. I deeply adore You. I thank You for the many grace You have accorded me and for all the graces, spiritual and material, You in Your fatherly goodness have prepared to strengthen my weakness. I ask You to forgive the many faults I have committed in the past. I beg the help of Your grace to keep me from offending You in the future and to remain faithful to the promises I have made to You many times. I sincerely renew them today. O Blessed Virgin, Saints in heaven, and especially you, St. Rita, help me make this Holy Exercise devoutly in order to obtain the light of mind and the strength of will to attain my eternal salvation. Amen.

### Life: The Miracle of the Bees

The father of our Saint was Antonio Lotti, and her mother was Amy Ferri. Little is known about them beyond the fact of their reputation for goodness, and that is enormous, especially at a time like theirs when the small villages were painfully divided. Roccaporena was one of the villages.

Antonio and Amy had no stake in the political quarrels that set Guelphs against Ghibellines. On the contrary, they sought to calm spirits and rivalries, so much so that they were nicknamed the "conciliators" or the "peace-bearers" of Jesus Christ. Their daughter would learn from them.

But over the years a secret sorrow had disturbed their tranquil joy. They had no children. In their home none of the cries that awaken so many echoes in the heart of parents had yet been heard. Many times they had, to this end, addressed to God the most ardent prayers.

Just when everything had led them to believe that God wanted the sacrifice of this legitimate desire, the unexpected happened, recalling the birth of St. John the Baptist, the precursor of Jesus. To spouses advanced in age God sent offspring, in this instance a baby girl. It was probably the year 1381.

"Margarita" was the name given the baby at its Baptism in the Church of St. Mary of the Commoners in Cascia. The name "Rita," under which she was canonized, is a diminutive of the Italian "Margarita." Even in the convent she was known as "Sister Rita." Today still she is known and venerated in the whole world by this diminutive.

Tradition has it that one day the little girl was put in a wicker basket and placed under a shade tree so her parents could go work in the fields. A swarm of bees appeared and surrounded her. They entered the mouth of the child and, without stinging her, deposited their honey.

A harvester happened to pass by. He had gashed his hand and was returning to the village to have it taken care of. Seeing the swarm, he made a motion with the wounded hand to drive them away. Suddenly the hand was healed. The episode made a deep impression on the good people of Roccaporena. The memory of it has been transmitted to posterity by a fresco that adorns the little chapel built on the very spot of the miracle.

The Church herself spoke of the event in the lessons of the Roman Breviary.

As for the bees, they followed Rita. After five hundred years the bees still live on the grounds of the convent in Cascia. In the seventeenth century Pope Urban VIII asked that some be brought to him in Rome. He took one of them, tied a silken thread around it, and let it escape. It returned to Cascia, or so it is said.

Today still, a touch of mystery hangs over these bees of St. Rita's convent. They are a little larger than ordinary bees and have neither stinger nor feeler. Eleven months of the year they remain shut up in the holes of an old wall. The week of the Passion they come out of their holes and always return to them during the octave of the feast of the Saint.

We should regard this tradition -- more than as a historical fact -- a symbol of what this infant would be: sweet and industrious.

### **Reflection: Blessed are the Meek**

Rita was to be a Saint of meekness. She had, so to speak, been predestined to it by the goodness of her parents. In the midst of much cruelty they were the "conciliators" of Jesus Christ. They worked to put an end to all the hatred in the village of Roccaporena.

The parents of Rita took the beatitude about "peacemakers" seriously. Note that this word means: those who "make" peace, who are its artisans. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9).

And we, are we artisans of peace wherever we are: at home, at work, or anywhere else? How do we handle our relations with one another? It would do us no good to have a certain piety if at the same time we were like people who deliberately create misunderstanding and, as the saying goes, throw oil on the fire.

That Rita was predestined to be a Saint of meekness was also suggested, at the time of her infancy, by the delightful miracle of the bees. Honey has always been a symbol of meekness. Let us not forget St. Francis de Sales affirming, from experience, that more flies are caught with a spoonful of honey than with a barrel of vinegar.

Our Lord weight His words well when He said: "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the land" (Matthew 5:5).

**Prayer: For the Spirit of Meekness**

O St. Rita, deeply Christian parents inculcated in you the sense of Christian goodness. Teach us to put it into practice. Obtain for us the honey of meekness. We know that to acquire this virtue we must first be capable of mastering ourselves. And we know very little about doing that. We let ourselves be led by our antipathies, our prejudices, our material interests. Help us change all that, you who were the Saint of meekness. Amen.

## Third Thursday

### Preparatory Prayer

O my God, Whose splendor fills heaven and earth, I believe You are present here. I know You are near me and in me, immersed in my unworthiness. I deeply adore You. I thank You for the many grace You have accorded me and for all the graces, spiritual and material, You in Your fatherly goodness have prepared to strengthen my weakness. I ask You to forgive the many faults I have committed in the past. I beg the help of Your grace to keep me from offending You in the future and to remain faithful to the promises I have made to You many times. I sincerely renew them today. O Blessed Virgin, Saints in heaven, and especially you, St. Rita, help me make this Holy Exercise devoutly in order to obtain the light of mind and the strength of will to attain my eternal salvation. Amen.

### Life: Education by Image and Example

We know nothing very precise about the education the Lotti gave their daughter. They certainly did not make her a woman of learning. One simply cannot give what one does not have. At the time of the Lotti the poor were probably unlettered, as were many people of modest means. Besides, there was no schoolhouse in Roccaporena.

The great book of images that children studied was the church of their village. Pictures, paintings, statues, stained glass windows, all helped to excite their minds and hearts. The land of Rita, Umbria, already was rich in native painters, who would soon give rise to the Peruginos and the Raphaels.

Child that she was, Rita did not have eyes enough for the many wonders mother Lotti explained to her. There were the Bible, especially the Gospel narratives. There was also the beautiful Golden Legend of the Saints and the legends of the Poverello, Francis of Assisi.

In the Bible and the legends Rita quenched her thirst for religious knowledge. One "book," nevertheless, topped them all: the Crucifix, the imposing Crucifix of so many Italian churches. It taught the child everything: love of Jesus, hatred of sin, and the spirit of penance.

Nothing, unfortunately, is known about the First Communion and the Confirmation of this exceptional child. However, we can surmise that each such occasion must have strengthened her sense of generosity.

Rita was the sole caretaker of her aged parents, and almost all the work around the house fell to her. As a reward her mother sometimes offered to buy her a small item she could use at her washstand. The little girl would graciously decline.

Like the monks living as solitaries in the caves around Roccaporena, the so-called Hermits of St. Augustine, Rita loved solitude. Her parents even let her have a small, secluded room. This she made over into a chapel decorated with images of the Passion. Here she prayed to Christ with all her heart, dreaming of becoming His bride by taking the veil of a nun.

We shall see the detour Providence allowed her to take before making this dream a reality.

### **Reflection: Importance of a Catholic Education**

There is a great difference between Rita's education and the education of most children today. Times have changed for sure. In our day it would be unthinkable to let a child remain unlettered. Children need to be educated if they are to take their place in society.

However, it is regrettable that too many parents insist on their children's instruction in matters that concern their future earthly destiny and neglect their children's religious education, which they regard as of little importance.

They take steps to get their child or children ready for First Communion, and that is all to the good. But children keep growing. Will their religious formation keep pace if no one helps them?

Teenagers may do well in secular studies yet remain on the level of a ten-year old in religious education. Small wonder that some of them give up all practice of their religions.

Christian parents must understand that one of their principal duties is to provide for the religious education of their children. Normally they should do so by choosing a Catholic school even if the choice involves a monetary sacrifice. If cost puts a Catholic school out of reach for them, they have the duty to supply the religious formation by other means.

Our American parishes have CCD programs where Catholic children and teenagers not in a parochial school are taught Catholic doctrine and practice.

In any event, our little ones should always receive at home their first Christian education. It is the parents' duty to teach their children their first prayers and to speak to them about Jesus, about the Blessed Virgin, about the beautiful stories in the Gospels, and about the lives of the Saints. Parents should take them, when still very young, to the church to visit our Lord and explain to them what the statues, the pictures, and the Way of the Cross represent. This St. Rita's mother did.

It is also the duty of parents to instill in their little ones the meaning of sin (what turns us away from Jesus) and the meaning of the state of grace (Jesus present in our hearts).

Parents, moreover, should ensure that their children are prepared for their First Confession and their First Communion. Let them know that this Confession and this Communion are not optional practices but obligatory for them from the time a child is capable of making them.

Only a religious education of the kind described here can form true Catholic Christians.

**Prayer: To Ensure the Religious Education of Our Children**

O St. Rita, you had the great happiness of being brought up by truly religious parents. Raise up among us many parents like yours. Let their principal care be to lead their children to Jesus. Let them be aware of their responsibility and have all the understanding and all the tact they need to fulfill their roles. Humbly ask the Holy Spirit to help mothers be solicitous for the faith and generosity of their children. Let our little ones learn to be unselfish and devoted to others. Let our teenagers be resolved to do their best, and let them be guided by a true love for Jesus. May our Lord help them to remain upright and pure in a world that is not. The temptations they will face are so many and so great that their perseverance will seem at times to be compromised. O Saint of most difficult cases, help the parents of today to educate the Catholics of tomorrow. Amen.

## Fourth Thursday

### Preparatory Prayer

O my God, Whose splendor fills heaven and earth, I believe You are present here. I know You are near me and in me, immersed in my unworthiness. I deeply adore You. I thank You for the many grace You have accorded me and for all the graces, spiritual and material, You in Your fatherly goodness have prepared to strengthen my weakness. I ask You to forgive the many faults I have committed in the past. I beg the help of Your grace to keep me from offending You in the future and to remain faithful to the promises I have made to You many times. I sincerely renew them today. O Blessed Virgin, Saints in heaven, and especially you, St. Rita, help me make this Holy Exercise devoutly in order to obtain the light of mind and the strength of will to attain my eternal salvation. Amen.

### Life: A Dreaded Marriage that Turns Out Well

Rita wanted to be a nun. That seemed to be her vocation, inasmuch as she had always loved solitude and the life of prayer.

However, her aged parents wanted her to marry, perhaps because they had increasing need of her and desperately wished to keep her in the village.

Rita, ever docile, deferentially accepted what her parents called "a good match."

Certainly, her fiancé, Paul Mancini, was not the ideal spouse. But possibly Rita's mildness could change his character for the better. After all, even someone who has been the subject to a tormented youth can become a good father.

It was important that a girl have a home. At this period, marriages were made without consulting the young people involved and in accord with the interest of the parents. Rita consented, smiling in order to hide her tears.

Thus, at the age of eighteen Rita married Paul. The early years were very hard for her. Her husband was a loud and violent man who at times even hurt her. He is said to have been full of anger, vulgar, and debauched.

However, the latest research has unearthed data that tend to rehabilitate the man. He did not have all these vices, we are now told.

Yet it is no less true that the characters of the two spouses did not interact very well. For example, marital authority was manifested by the husband a little too harshly, frightening the timid Rita.

Moreover, Paul was a soldier in a troubled country, and his vocation was more important to him than his home. When he returned there battle-weary, he was often in a foul mood. Rita tried to compensate for this by her patience and her delicate nature.

Little by little, the two spouses drew closer together. Paul put forth efforts for the peace of the home, and the couple was relatively happy for fifteen years.

Under the influence of his bride, Paul became a good Christian. Rita's acceptance of the cross given her eventually brought conjugal happiness.

Therefore, it is with good reason that Catholics have made it a habit to entrust difficult matrimonial situations to St. Rita. She had experienced such situations and had succeeded in overcoming them by the only true victory: that of love that ends up being shared.

### **Reflection: Example of Heroic Patience**

Sometimes God's ways are incomprehensible. Rita seemed to have a call to the religious life, but Providence allowed her parents to direct her to the marriage state.

This fact causes us to realize that God's plans are often much different from ours. He is far wiser than we are. He sees situations clearly in His Divine Wisdom, and we owe Him our trust.

Once God's will is clear, the only reasonable attitude is to submit to it. St. Rita did just that: she submitted to God's will.

We now understand, in the light of this Saint's experience, why God acted as He did. He wanted to give unhappy spouses a striking example of heroic patience.

So many men and women today are suffering the painful consequences of an ill-considered marriage. All too often these spouses, unlike Rita, have only themselves to blame. They chose to ignore the advice given them to think twice before getting married. Heeding only their passion, they rushed headlong into a deplorable union.

When the time of illusions has passed, these spouses begin, too late, to comprehend the mistake they have made. Often they react with violence and ineptness. A struggle between two egotists ensues, and then they can think of no solution but the abomination of divorce. With that, their own two lives are shattered as well as those of their children who are always innocent victims.

People presume to say that they "must start over." Sometimes even parents who consider themselves devout Catholics give this shocking advice and encourage their son or daughter to enter into a new union outside the Church, which keeps them away from the Sacraments.

How much better to follow the example of St. Rita, the faithful wife. She endured difficult times, but her suffering was not in vain. She not only found the joy of a happy home but also saved her husband's soul. She was indeed a "peace-bearer" of Jesus Christ: "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the land" (Matthew 5:5).

**Prayer: For Those in Troubled Marriages**

O St. Rita, make us understand that a vocation is not only a matter of attraction. Enable us to see clearly that it is also a matter of finding, in ordinary events, God's will for us and then accepting it even if it seems to be baffling and contrary to our wishes. Teach those called to the marriage state by the Lord to reflect deeply on the delicate choice that will influence their destiny. Let them not be deceived by their feelings; instead, let them look for the solid qualities that keep a home united in the joy of the Lord. Teach unhappy spouses the power of patience and mildness. Let them not give way to discouragement but, like you, let them save both the happiness of their home and the soul of their spouse. Amen.

## **Fifth Thursday**

### **Preparatory Prayer**

O my God, Whose splendor fills heaven and earth, I believe You are present here. I know You are near me and in me, immersed in my unworthiness. I deeply adore You. I thank You for the many grace You have accorded me and for all the graces, spiritual and material, You in Your fatherly goodness have prepared to strengthen my weakness. I ask You to forgive the many faults I have committed in the past. I beg the help of Your grace to keep me from offending You in the future and to remain faithful to the promises I have made to You many times. I sincerely renew them today. O Blessed Virgin, Saints in heaven, and especially you, St. Rita, help me make this Holy Exercise devoutly in order to obtain the light of mind and the strength of will to attain my eternal salvation. Amen.

### **Life: Home Life and the Service of Others**

The little church in Roccaporena, where Rita was married, still stands today. Also in Roccaporena can still be seen the Mancini House, where Rita and her husband lived after the death of her parents. It is possible that the two couples lived there together.

Engaged couples from many countries like to have their promises blessed in the Mancini House, which has been made into a chapel. A precious relic of St. Rita, her blood-stained cloak, is kept in the chapel. Her wedding ring and her peasant rosary are kept in the convent in Cascia.

Rita's wedding ring represented at first the sacrifice she had to make. Her sadness, however, was changed to joy and blessings by the conversion of her husband. The rosary, like the blood-stained cloak, tells the secret of this conversion. Did not our Lord say that some categories of demons can only be driven out by prayer and penance?

Rita was always a praying soul. She had great devotion to the suffering Christ. her rosary testifies to her devotion to Mary.

In the fifteenth century the method of the rosary was already well-known and widely used. People prayed the Hail Marys and meditated on the mysteries. The meditation is by far the main part.

We can easily imagine our Saint calling to mind the joys, the sorrows, and the glories of Jesus and Mary. We can picture her comparing events in her own life with the mysteries and drawing courage and hope from them.

Rita was not content with prayer alone. She lived at a time when bodily penances were much in favor. Sometimes they were practiced to excess, as in the confraternities of Flagellants.

Rita wore a hair shirt. She also would scourge herself, which accounts for the bloodstains on her cloak. To the official Lent, she would add one and even two other "Lents" wherein she survived only on bread and water.

Not far from the Mancini House in Roccaporena there was a kind of small dispensary called the Lazaret. Here the sick poor were nursed by kindhearted women. Rita was among those nurses. Her historians speak of her increased generosity toward the poor. They add that "her husband approved."

### **Reflection: The Need for Penance**

All through her married life Rita was a model for the sincere Christian. What should be borne in mind, more than anything else, is her spirit of penance. This is more worthy of reflection than her meditative way of praying the rosary, or her heroic patience, or even her charity toward the poor.

In our day, people do not like to hear of penance. The Church herself has had to reduce our fast to almost nothing. Bodily mortification is seldom preached.

Present-day materialism has made the body king. Nothing is denied it; everything seems owed it. We seek comfort in all its forms. We seek it in defiance of all decency. We seek the pleasures of the senses, beginning with those of food and drink, on which so much is spent. A comparable sum, if not more, is spent to keep abreast of the latest fashions.

Crowning it all is unbridled sensuality. "Your body is yours alone!" proclaims a pagan literature, relayed by immoral and degrading films. Not a few succumb to temptation, and many adults abandon all religious practice simply because, after their youth, Christian morality seems too hard for them to bear.

Against this deluge of pagan influence, almost no one dares to protest. Human respect paralyzes the people who should react and makes speechless the people who should speak out.

One person, and only one, has put forth a call to bring back the authentic Gospel; it is the Blessed Virgin. At Lourdes she repeated "Penance, penance, penance!" At Fatima she let little Jacinta know that "sins of the flesh are the sins that lead the most to Hell."

We who feel attracted to St. Rita should have the courage to examine the abyss that separates us from her spirituality in the matter of bodily penance. We should also ask her to help us practice some form of penance regularly.

### **Prayer: To Foster Mortification and Sacrifice**

O St. Rita of Cascia, you took the Gospel of penance seriously. You knew how to master the instincts of your body to keep it from oppressing your soul. Help us, have pity on us. We too are swept up in the torrent of materialism. Do not allow us to be lost in it, nor any of the people we hold dear. Give us a high regard for mortification, seeing that it is indispensable. In the present and the future we have to defend ourselves against the contagion of evil. In the past there is much we have to make amends for, we who sometimes say we have never hurt anyone. Yet the truth is that by our sensuality we have hurt ourselves. Shake off our torpor. Help us to free ourselves. Above all, teach us to protect our young by instilling in them a love for God and a desire for mortification and sacrifice. These are the price of their purity, and we know very well that purity will be for them the sole means of their perseverance in the faith. "Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew :8). Amen.

## **Sixth Thursday**

### **Life: Two Severe Trials -- Deaths of Parents and Husband**

Rita went through trials most people go through, particularly the loss of dear ones in death. She was born of parents far along in years. Her life as a teenager was entirely devoted to them. She provided for their needs and made them happy when she agreed to get married.

It is probably that Rita and her husband lived with her parents at the Mancini House. Living together inevitably causes some problems that cannot be avoided. However, the frightful temperament of her husband made the situation even more troublesome. Rita had to be an angel of meekness to keep the house at peace and the parents comfortable in their home. The situation lasted for three years, precisely the period in which she was "the patient wife."

Antonio and Amy Lotti seem to have died a few days apart -- he on March 19, the Feast of St. Joseph; and she on March 25, feast of the Annunciation. To us, going to heaven together looks like a touching blessing of Christian love.

It is beautiful to see a husband and wife who, to an advanced age, stood by each other for better or for worse. It is also beautiful to see them blessed with going to the grave in close succession.

Rita missed her parents. She was cheered, however, by the change in her husband around the time of their death.

After the change there were fifteen years of marital bliss. Then, one evening, came the shocking news: returning home from Cascia, Paul was assassinated. This tragedy remains enigmatic. For fifteen years this man, formerly so cruel and fearsome to the neighbors, had given no one any reason to hate him. No doubt, he was the victim of a vendetta.

Paul's assassination was an agony for his poor wife. To the shattering loss of her human happiness was added a gnawing anxiety over her husband's soul. She knew that a sudden death is always a dreadful thing. The year was probably 1417.

### **Reflection: The Danger of Sudden Death**

Her parents and husband were among the people Rita loved most here on earth. When she lost them to death, each loss was a severe affliction, alleviated however by Christian hope.

Rita had faith ardent enough and logical enough to repeat what St. Augustine wrote after the death of his mother, St. Monica: "We must not mourn too much for our mother, because she did not die unhappy. She is not even dead in the least. We are convinced of that."

We can imagine the veneration Rita must have had for her deceased parents. They became the heavenly protectors of her home. Often she spoke of them to her children, and often she took the children to the grave of their grandparents as though on a pilgrimage to the grave of Saints.

At prayer in common (meals, mornings, evenings) she undoubtedly invoked her parents, at Masses that she asked to be offered in their honor the whole family was present. She offered them "in their honor" provisionally: on condition that such prayers might still be needed for the repose of their souls.

The death of her husband staggered Rita even more because it was such a sudden death. Today, our faith is so weak that we could easily be led to envy people dying suddenly. "At least they didn't suffer," we hear it said.

Some people are senseless enough to think that a sudden death is not a calamity. Yet nothing is quite so dangerous as to appear before the Lord without having had time to think about it, to prepare for it, to be sorry for sins and receive forgiveness.

Hence, the Church in the Litany of the Saints puts on our lips this insistent supplication: "From sudden death, deliver us, O Lord.":

### **Prayer: To Obtain the Christian Meaning of Death**

O St. Rita, you had your kind heart pained by your various periods of mourning. Obtain for us an understanding of the Christian meaning of death. So easily we let ourselves mourn like people who have no hope. Very often we think first of ourselves, of our great sorrow, sometimes even of the material difficulties that follow the death of our dear ones. We should, instead, think first of them and their new situation on the threshold of Eternal Life, which is so mysterious for us. We have been instructed in the faith and we know that God's judgment in regard to our loved ones has already been carried out. If our dead are in purgatory, we know we can help them get released and entered in "the place of refreshment, light, and peace." Remind us, then, O St. Rita, that in this respect one thing alone matters: that we avail ourselves of all the means that God in His mercy has given us to bring about their deliverance. Remind us that we can offer our poor merits together with the infinite merits of the Lord and have the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass offered for them. The Eucharistic Christ then serves as the living hyphen between us and our dear ones. With him, in Him, and through him we remain united with the ones we call our dead but who are more alive than we. The certainty of meeting again in eternity then possesses our hearts. We have the feeling that families here on earth are destined to be brought together again in heaven. Humanly speaking, that is the greatest consolation. Help us, O St. Rita, to attain this as fully as possible, in Christ our Lord. Amen.

## Seventh Thursday

### Preparatory Prayer

O my God, Whose splendor fills heaven and earth, I believe You are present here. I know You are near me and in me, immersed in my unworthiness. I deeply adore You. I thank You for the many grace You have accorded me and for all the graces, spiritual and material, You in Your fatherly goodness have prepared to strengthen my weakness. I ask You to forgive the many faults I have committed in the past. I beg the help of Your grace to keep me from offending You in the future and to remain faithful to the promises I have made to You many times. I sincerely renew them today. O Blessed Virgin, Saints in heaven, and especially you, St. Rita, help me make this Holy Exercise devoutly in order to obtain the light of mind and the strength of will to attain my eternal salvation. Amen.

### Life: A Christian Mother

Rita had two children, two sons. There was very little age difference: perhaps they were even twins. They must have been born in the early years of the marriage, since they were already young men when their father died and Rita had been married for only eighteen years.

Tradition is not entirely in agreement as to their names. Apparently, one was called John-James and the other was Paul-Mary. Rita was a young mother with a lot of good sense. It never occurred to her to give the children a non-religious name that may have been in style.

In this matter of names, Rita's times were less frivolous than ours. When choosing a name for their children, people thought especially of giving them a Patron Saint who could be an example to them on earth and an intercessor in heaven.

Concerning her sons' education, we only know that in their early childhood Rita used to take them to the "Lazaret: to visit the poor and the infirm. Each visit was a real lesson in charity. Rita's way of teaching the lesson is much better than simply teaching from a book.

The father approved of this method of education and helped his wife as much as he could. When he felt a surge of anger, he would leave the house so as to not scandalize the children. This should be recognized as important, since care must be taken lest the young perceive some hostility between their parents.

After their father's assassination, one lesson Rita could not get across to her grown sons was the lesson of forgiveness. She herself had made the heroic act of forgiving the murderers with all her heart. After

this merciful step and because of it, people said God made known to her that her husband's soul was saved.

Instilling in her sons the same sentiments of mercy and forgiveness proved impossible. The sons were very much like their contentious ancestors and had grown up in a time of hatred. They were also carried away by their false sense of honor under the guise of a "vendetta."

When Rita reminded them of the Lord's teaching: "Love your enemies... Pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew :44), she felt she was not understood, much less followed. She was afraid her sons might lose their souls by believing they were honoring their father's memory.

Therefore, in an act of heroism, Rita formulated a prayer that was in keeping with her Christian sentiments but crushed her mother's heart. Indeed, she uttered those stupefying words: "Take them, my God, rather than they offend You."

The prayer was heard; for a chronicler wrote that Rita's two sons "were called to a better life." God took them home, and they died the Christian way after renouncing their hatred and ill-will.

For the Saint of the Impossible, here was her first hopeless case. It turned out very well indeed.

### **Reflection: Forgiveness of Others**

One of the most difficult forms of charity is to forgive offenses. We have all suffered offenses. There is little comparison, however, between what we have had to bear and what was weighing on St. Rita's heart after her husband's assassination.

She remembered Jesus Christ on the Cross interceding for His executioners: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). Perhaps we do not have enough love to model ourselves on our Divine Lord and to react as He did.

Let us at least have intelligence enough to know where our interest lies. Our Lord said and repeated in the Gospel that He would deal with us the same way we had dealt with our neighbor.

If we want to be forgiven, then let us begin by forgiving others. As the Apostle St. James wrote in his epistle (2:13): "Judgment is without mercy to those who have not shown mercy; but mercy triumphs over judgment."

We ought to reflect more on St. Rita's prayer regarding her sons: "Take them, rather than they offend You." This was nearly like the prayer of a queen of France, though she was not a Saint: "My son, you know how much I love you," said Blanche of Castille to the young Louis IX, "and yet I would rather see you dead at my feet than guilty of a single mortal sin."

What a lesson for us and how praiseworthy it would be if, like these truly Christian mothers (Rita and Blanche), we thought much more about the soul of our children than about the health of their body.

**Prayer: To Practice True Charity**

O St. Rita, raise up in our families mothers who are truly educators. So many mothers around us only think of their children's physical life. Others, it is true, also concern themselves with the intellectual development of their children. Few mothers, however, do "the one thing necessary," which is to guide their children to encounter the Lord. Obtain for us, O St. Rita, what is sorely needed: many more mothers who think first about helping their children live in a state of grace and about instilling in them Godlike charity. Lord, You gave St. Rita the grace to love her enemies. By her merits and intercession, enable us to forgive those who have injured us and to so merit the reward promised to the meek and the mournful. Grant, O my God, that by the intercession of our Saint, we too may carry in our hearts the marks of Your charity and constantly enjoy the benefits of lasting peace. Amen.

## **Eighth Thursday**

### **Preparatory Prayer**

O my God, Whose splendor fills heaven and earth, I believe You are present here. I know You are near me and in me, immersed in my unworthiness. I deeply adore You. I thank You for the many grace You have accorded me and for all the graces, spiritual and material, You in Your fatherly goodness have prepared to strengthen my weakness. I ask You to forgive the many faults I have committed in the past. I beg the help of Your grace to keep me from offending You in the future and to remain faithful to the promises I have made to You many times. I sincerely renew them today. O Blessed Virgin, Saints in heaven, and especially you, St. Rita, help me make this Holy Exercise devoutly in order to obtain the light of mind and the strength of will to attain my eternal salvation. Amen.

### **Life: Knocking at the Convent Door**

The year 1417 was a sorrowful one for Rita. In the course of it she lost her husband and both her sons. For the Church, it was a hopeful year, bringing the end of the Great Schism.

Rita was thirty-six; Joan of Arc was five. Rita seemed to be all alone in the world. As a matter of fact, she was not alone. She was living with her "dead," those who had returned to the Father and had become her personal Saints. She talked to them, prayed to them, and asked them for their advice.

Rita probably had a kind of homesickness for the religious life. She has always lived in accord with the spirit of this kind of life. Poverty, chastity, and obedience are its pillars. In her years as a married woman she had tried to practice them as much as possible.

She was obedient to her aged parents despite the difficulty sometimes encountered in keeping old people content. She was obedient to her husband, even in the abusive years.

She practiced poverty, not from avarice or fear of being in want but from a desire to give more alms. She practiced chastity in its conjugal form, a type often more difficult than the chastity of the unmarried, which is respected by so few Christians today.

Good as it was, for Rita life outside the convent was not sufficient. She wanted to make a more complete gift of herself. The convent of the Augustinian nuns in Cascia attracted her. When she applied for admission, the convent, named after St. Mary Magdalene, turned her down.

The rejection had nothing to do with Rita's being a widow. In the Church widows always have been a particularly cherished and assisted class.

Something quite different was at work. In the convent in Cascia there were nuns who belonged to the clan that was hostile to the clan to which Rita belonged.

Rita would have to bring about a reconciliation between the two parties. Only then could she enter the convent without bringing along an element of division.

This seemed to be a superhuman enterprise. On the human level her case did appear to be impossible.

The solution? It seemed to come from heaven. Rita had her advocates -- St. John the Baptist, St. Augustine, and St. Nicholas of Tolentine, who had inspired her vocation.

By their help and intercession Rita overcame a seemingly impossible obstacle: the hatred that separated many families of Cascia and that had already caused the death of her husband. The spiral of vendetta had to be stopped.

In order to put an end to these feelings of wrath and acts of vengeance, the widow became a messenger of peace. With humility and courage, she went from house to house, asking all the families who were at odds to be reconciled with one another.

At the same time, she besought the Lord through the intermediary of her "Saint Advocates." And God granted her this miracle of peace -- for herself and her village.

Rita willed that this act of reconciliation should be committed to writing and signed before a notary in accord with custom. And then, with the signed agreement in hand, she was finally able to pass through the formerly inaccessible convent of St. Mary Magdalene. Such is historical fact.

However, this fact has been transformed into a legendary event by the popular imagination. It has become a kind of "flight" of Rita -- accompanied by St. John the Baptist, St. Augustine, and St. Nicholas of Torentine -- from the crag of Roccaporena to the cloister of the convent.

Her heavenly "patrons" had presumably accomplished her entry despite all doors being shut, and the religious community could no longer refuse to give consent!

### **Reflection: Be Reconciled with One Another**

Nothing is impossible to those who work for reconciliation. From her parents, Rita had come to understand and admire the role of messengers of peace and good relations. Peace is the subject of one of the Beatitudes pronounced by Christ: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9).

Like a butterfly, she lightly ascended and descended countless stairways, both outside and inside homes, from the center of Cascia to the most distant villages. She asked everyone in them to be reconciled with her, a condition she knew was indispensable before consecrating herself to God.

Such reconciliation is even more important than any kind of sacrifice according to the words of our Lord Himself: "When you present your offering at the altar and remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift at the altar and go and be reconciled with him" (Matthew 5:23-24).

Therefore, we must be reconciled with our brothers in order to be truly united with God. Then only will we be able to offer Him our praise as well as our prayers and requests. And the Lord will in turn grant us His grace.

Following St. Rita's example, let us be reconciled with one another: spouses with each other; children among themselves and with their parents, friend, and neighbors with one another. The peace in the world that we so desire can only come when there is peace in our personal and social lives.

#### **Prayer: To Obtain the Gift of Reconciliation**

O my God, grant me the gift of reconciliation with members of my family and with others. May I take the time to listen to everyone who has no one with whom to speak. May I listen willingly to all who cannot express themselves or who do not dare to do so, thus giving them the opportunity to be heard. I could never hope to listen to everyone, but I can adopt an attitude of listening toward everyone with whom I come into contact. When I strive to listen to my neighbors, I do for them what You, my God, have done for me. By Your grace, make me a messenger of reconciliation. Amen.

## **Ninth Day**

### **Preparatory Prayer**

O my God, Whose splendor fills heaven and earth, I believe You are present here. I know You are near me and in me, immersed in my unworthiness. I deeply adore You. I thank You for the many grace You have accorded me and for all the graces, spiritual and material, You in Your fatherly goodness have prepared to strengthen my weakness. I ask You to forgive the many faults I have committed in the past. I beg the help of Your grace to keep me from offending You in the future and to remain faithful to the promises I have made to You many times. I sincerely renew them today. O Blessed Virgin, Saints in heaven, and especially you, St. Rita, help me make this Holy Exercise devoutly in order to obtain the light of mind and the strength of will to attain my eternal salvation. Amen.

### **Life: The Miracle of the Vine**

With God's help, Rita entered the convent of St. Mary Magdalene in Cascia. She as forty years old and already had a remarkable life as wife and mother behind her. Just the same, she had to make her novitiate.

For people with a strong personality the novitiate can be a trying time. Superiors tend to test them by forming them in the virtues of humility and obedience.

What is called "the miracle of the vine" may have happened during Rita's novitiate. It is inspired by an old story found in an ancient book, John Cassian's Conferences. Cassian founded the monastery of St. Victor in Marseilles at the beginning of the fifth century, about a thousand years before St. Rita.

According to the Conferences, a superior wanted to test the obedience of one of the monks. He told him to water, every day, a dead branch stuck in the ground. The branch never flowered, so the superior threw it away and effectively ended the test.

Mother Abbess of Cascia did something similar, though the ending was not the same. She told Rita to water daily, over a long period of time, a dry wooden stick she had asked her to bring into the yard and plant next to a wall.

Rita obeyed scrupulously. She watered the wooden stick every day, even when the rain was falling. She kept up the daily watering for as long as the imposed obedience required it.

Tradition says that one day this wooden stick began to bud, then to flower miraculously. It became a vine that produced grapes of a form and taste unknown anywhere else.

Tradition also says that the people soon began to bring some of these grapes to the Holy Father and to the Cardinals and distinguished benefactors of the Augustinian Order.

At the present time, grapes produced by the "Vine of the Miracle" are blessed and given to the benefactors of the convent in Cascia.

This tradition is beautiful and filled with instruction for us. It teaches that absolute obedience based on the love of God will never lack recompense. No matter what the circumstances may be, it will make us better persons.

After completing her novitiate, Rita was allowed to make her profession. She took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. By these vows she made a threefold solemn promise to God.

The following night she had a dream in which she saw a ladder. Its top reached to heaven; leaning against it was her beloved Lord. The ladder recalls the ladder of Jacob which the Patriarch saw in a vision when an exchange of promises, a Covenant, as struck between God and himself.

Like Jacob, Rita found a message in the ladder. As one of her earliest biographers notes, it was a very clear sign to her that she would reach the summit of Christian perfection.

### **Reflection: Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience**

We also, Christians living in the world, should strive to make our life an ascent. We, of course, do not have the obligation to practice poverty, chastity, and obedience in the same way as men and women religious. These basic virtues are nonetheless necessary for us also, beginning with obedience.

Let us not forget that our Lord redeemed the world by obedience.

Reparation for something is made by its contrary. Against the cold of winter we try to create some warmth, for example. The same goes for reparation for sin. Sin is essentially disobedience. Reparation for it is made by the most perfect obedience possible.

That is why "Christ became obedient unto death" (Philippians 2:8). Combining our obedience with His remains for us the best way to take part in His Redemption of all the ones we love. Let us, then, be obedient to God as perfectly as possible.

Let us bear in mind that Christ makes His will known to us by His Commandments, by His Gospel, by the teachings of His Church, and even by our fellow citizens. He also makes it known by the events of our life, be they trials or happy occasions. Whether this Divine Will is agreeable to us or seems painful, let us learn to accept it joyously.

Like St. Rita watering the wooden stick, let us not discuss, let us not analyze. Let us simply obey with eyes closed and hearts wide open.

Let us also have the spirit of poverty and not be greedy for gain. Let us remember how insistently the Lord and His Gospel warn us about the love of money. To get more and more of it some Christians do not hesitate to transgress God's Law. In its quest they come to regard Sunday work as altogether normal.

Little by little the conscience of such people is corrupted. To them the demands of the most elementary justice are no longer so evident. They make shady business deals and take advantage of the ignorance or misery of others. But because of their corrupted conscience they make light of such transgressions and never dream of mentioning them in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

What of the duty to practice the most elementary charity, e.g., to give alms? We may not like it, but it does require us to give from our abundance to people lacking the necessities.

Nonetheless, when someone begs alms from people who consider themselves devout, it often happens that what they give is ridiculously meager. Yet our Lord said that we will be judged on our charity toward others.

#### **Prayer: To Practice the Evangelical Virtues**

O St. Rita, you carried out faithfully the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Put in our hearts the conviction that the Christian life is not just a question of devotion but rather consists in doing God's will in every thing. "Not everyone who says to Me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the Kingdom of heaven, but only the person who does My Father's will" (Matthew 7:21). Jesus also said: "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (John 14:15). Help us, then, O St. Rita, to set aside our own will and to seek what God wants, in chastity, which is at times difficult to observe, as well as in justice and in charity. When you see us attached to things of the world, for example, to money, help us to free ourselves. Make us generous in giving to others, in coming to the aid of people in need, of the elderly in particular, and of the truly poor, who are always the most undemanding. May our charity not be in words alone but also in deeds. Teach us to deprive ourselves occasionally so as to have more to give and thus, like you, to be true disciples of the Lord Jesus. Amen.

# Tenth Thursday

## Preparatory Prayer

O my God, Whose splendor fills heaven and earth, I believe You are present here. I know You are near me and in me, immersed in my unworthiness. I deeply adore You. I thank You for the many grace You have accorded me and for all the graces, spiritual and material, You in Your fatherly goodness have prepared to strengthen my weakness. I ask You to forgive the many faults I have committed in the past. I beg the help of Your grace to keep me from offending You in the future and to remain faithful to the promises I have made to You many times. I sincerely renew them today. O Blessed Virgin, Saints in heaven, and especially you, St. Rita, help me make this Holy Exercise devoutly in order to obtain the light of mind and the strength of will to attain my eternal salvation. Amen.

## Life: The Stigmata of the Crown of Thorns

It is hard for us to imagine how much the Cross was venerated in medieval times. This veneration was partly an outgrowth of the Crusades.

In the thirteenth century devotion to the Crucifix was so ingrained in St. Francis of Assisi that he received the Stigmata on his own body. This happened at Alverno, not far from Cascia.

The following century, St. Catherine of Siena received the same favor as Francis, but our Lord let her keep the pain of her Stigmata without making the Stigmata themselves visible to others.

As for Rita, she too was favored with a mystical phenomenon fifteen years before her death. On Good Friday of the year 1442, she went with her Sisters, as was the custom, to the parish church for the Office of the Passion of our Lord.

The ardent and moving preaching of the Friar entrusted with the Lenten exercise touched Sister Rita so much that she was spiritually overwhelmed.

Returning to the convent in haste, she ran to kneel before a fourteenth-century fresco that was in a little chapel, a decrepit oratory next to the choir stalls of the Sisters.

The fresco, which pictures a crucifix, still exists.

A biographer notes: "Rita began to ask Christ most ardently to make her feel at least one of the many thorns that had pierced His brow.

"What she asked for, she received. She felt the desired hurt. But also, and from then on, she was afflicted by an incurable wound that would remain with her till death.

"The wound was a true Stigmata, not just a scar. It was an open wound, purulent and fetid, that inflicted terrible suffering on Rita.

"The wound resisted all attempts at healing, and it never left her during the last fifteen years of her life - except during her pilgrimage to Rome."

Those who go to Cascia on pilgrimage are moved upon visiting the chapel of the miraculous Christ, also known as the "Hermitage of the Thorn," as well as Rita's little cell. They are the two historical places in which people sense the presence of the faith.

In her little chapel Rita created what she called "stations" of the Passion of our Lord. In her cell she made one part a representation of Calvary, another of the Sepulcher, and so on.

Rita prayed continually before these stations, which were her "way of the cross." Many times the physical impressions made on her by the stations were so intense that she fell into a swoon.

### **Reflection: Focusing on Christ's Passion**

If we compare our reaction to Christ's suffering with the profound reactions of the Saints, we may find that the Saints put us to shame. They are deeply moved by His sufferings. We seem to be coldly indifferent.

As it is with so many other realities of our Faith, so it is with the sorrowful Passion: we do not give it enough thought.

For example, few Christians today still pray the Way of the Cross. It is, nevertheless, a salutary devotion. It teaches the gravity of sin by reminding us of what it took to atone for us.

Perhaps a short meditation on the scourged Christ would make us ashamed of all the sins we commit by indulging our bodies. Or a short meditation on the crown of thorns could make us less self-centered, less conceited in the presence of God made Man. He wanted no other signs of His Kingship on earth than this humiliating and painful emblem, together with derision and outrages.

If we thought of Christ more often as carrying His Cross, we would probably get a better understanding of what a human life is all about. We would find that for the most part it consists of carrying a cross.

Under the weight of this cross we fall again and again, despite the comforters encountered along the way: the Virgin Mother, Simon of Cyrene, the friendly Veronica.

What Jesus taught the women of Jerusalem He would teach us. He would say it does no good to lament. He would say we must move into action, must deprive ourselves, must be one with His Cross as the living Crucifix of Calvary.

Then, crowning His teaching, He would say we must accept the entire will of the Father to the very end, to the very last word: "It is finished."

Instead of all that, we keep looking for some sort of easy religion, one that does not affect us too much. A little devotion to this or that Saint dispenses us, we tell ourselves, from all the rest.

We have lost the sense of sin and the punishment it deserves. This is the reason our contrition is so often insufficient. Our mentality has drifted away from the Faith without our becoming aware of it; we have evolved into a society of Christians without Christianity.

Putting ourselves in the presence of the stigmatic and enthusiastic follower of Christ that Rita was, let us pray as follows.

**Prayer: To Obtain True Contrition**

Because of St. Rita's merits we beseech You, O Lord, to pierce our hearts with the thorn of supernatural sorrow that consists of true contrition. Free us from all our sins by Your grace, so that we may offer You the Eucharist with clean hearts and a new spirit. And each time we have been nourished and made stronger by Holy Communion, engrave on our mentality the Stigmata of Christ's Love and His Passion so that we may remain always in Your peace. We ask You this, O Blessed Trinity, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## Eleventh Thursday

### Preparatory Prayer

O my God, Whose splendor fills heaven and earth, I believe You are present here. I know You are near me and in me, immersed in my unworthiness. I deeply adore You. I thank You for the many grace You have accorded me and for all the graces, spiritual and material, You in Your fatherly goodness have prepared to strengthen my weakness. I ask You to forgive the many faults I have committed in the past. I beg the help of Your grace to keep me from offending You in the future and to remain faithful to the promises I have made to You many times. I sincerely renew them today. O Blessed Virgin, Saints in heaven, and especially you, St. Rita, help me make this Holy Exercise devoutly in order to obtain the light of mind and the strength of will to attain my eternal salvation. Amen.

### Life: The Roman Jubilee

Jubilees have existed since the year 1300. They used to be proclaimed every fifty years; now they occur every twenty-five years.

In former times jubilees were the occasion for making a penitential pilgrimage to Rome. They came to a close with the great joy of a plenary indulgence, the most formal and most generous of all.

The jubilee of 140 was particularly important. The Church had regained her unity and her internal peace only three years earlier.

The regaining of this peace and unity came after the disorders caused by the Council of Basle and then by the Duke of Savoy, Amadeus VIII, who had agreed to become the antipope Felix V.

More than ever, Rome was seen as the center of restored unity. People came to Rome from everywhere.

These pilgrimages of former times required far greater physical endurance than those of today. People had to go on foot. They had to ford rivers, brave the elements, and sleep out in the open. Yet the crowds were overflowing.

Monasteries and convents opened their doors to let men and women religious gain their jubilee indulgence. Rita also wanted to go to Rome, but because of her fetid wound it seemed out of the question.

Mother Abbess of Cascia did not risk much when she told Rita she could go as soon as she was cured. This good Superior was ill-prepared to deal with the woman who some day would become the "Saint of the Impossible."

Rita prayed and the wound dried up. So she could go, after all. A small group of Augustinian Sisters from Cascia, with Rita at the head, went across the Apennines, through Rieti, and over the via Flaminia. It was a picturesque route, but a long and difficult one.

On the way the Sisters began to wonder if they had enough money to carry their pilgrimage to the end. This preoccupation struck our Saint as not at all evangelical. She carried the purse, and no one took offense when she threw it disdainfully in a stream the little group was crossing.

"Think, my Sisters," she said, "what deception the world would have about us if it saw us provided with money. If, however, we disdain wealth and truly show ourselves to be Sisters of poverty, all will know that we are true Religious in the spirit of Christ."

To us, throwing the purse in the stream may seem to have been improper or foolhardy. No, it was simply the reaction of a soul having an abhorrence of money, for love of which people will commit so many sins.

The group made it to Rome. The marvelous Basilica of St. Peter as we know it today did not yet exist. In the old Constantinian Church the pilgrims went to venerate the remains of the Holy Apostles. They also visited the Roman Colosseum, where so many martyrs had been the prey of wild beasts.

In the Church of the Holy Cross of Jerusalem, they prayed before relics of the Passion. For Rita, who had received the Stigmata of the thorn, what an emotional experience it must have been to see there, devoutly preserved, two thorns from the painful crown.

Above all, the pilgrims saw the Pope, "the gentle Christ on earth," as St. Catherine of Siena had said not long before. In him is the embodiment of the mystery of the Church, ever One and ever Holy despite the weaknesses of the people that make it up.

The Roman pilgrimage was certainly a high point in Rita's life, but in the fuller view of this humble Sister there were other high points, less known or even unsuspected.

For who would have thought that Rita would be one of the best workers in the renewal of the Roman Church? Above all, who could have foreseen that this dear woman, old before her time, emaciated and lost in the crowd, would, four hundred and fifty years later, be solemnly canonized in the new Basilica of Michelangelo?

### **Reflection: The Value of Pilgrimages**

People have always had a liking for pilgrimages. They have felt that there are "places where the Spirit breathes," places on our earth where the spiritual seems to assert itself more than anywhere else.

Sometimes they are places to which heaven has inclined in famous apparitions, as at Lourdes or Fatima. They are also the many places where Saints have lived, from which they took their flight to the Father's house, and where their bodies await the signal of the definitive resurrection.

Crowds are attracted to these privileged places as if to escape the daily routine. The journey to these places of pilgrimage takes the act of denial of self out of the abstract and brings it into the concrete. The journey does the same for purification of the soul and for the effort to gain more enlightenment.

The fact is that people always return spiritually strengthened from a pilgrimage properly made. The key to such a pilgrimage consists in going not as mere tourists attentive to their own comfort, nor as idle curiosity-seekers, and especially not as snobs contemptuous of their "inferiors."

To be fruitful a pilgrimage requires preparation of the soul -- in particular, its purification or cleansing. There is no use going to Rome, to Cascia, or to any other holy place without being in the state of grace and without wanting to benefit so as to lead a more Christian life.

### **Prayer: To Fix our Eyes on Heaven during our Earthly Pilgrimage**

O St. Rita, you are the model of our devotion when we want to undertake a pilgrimage. Help us to benefit always, as you yourself did, from the graces that this ancient Christian tradition may bring to us. Keep us friendly and cheerful on the way but not too concerned with our comfort. Make us see that the journey to any house of God on earth is a symbol of another journey, in which neither the effort nor the self-denial should be feared, because at its end lies the City of God. We are such awful stay-at-homes, so comfortably settled in our trivial, mediocre lives. Obtain for us the will and the courage to make the journey to new horizons and ring our brothers and sisters along. In addition, enable us to have a right understanding of money so that we may make use of it without becoming overly attached to it. Obtain for us -- to crown all our efforts -- the will to go even farther, even higher, toward the Light of God! Amen.

## Twelfth Thursday

### Preparatory Prayer

O my God, Whose splendor fills heaven and earth, I believe You are present here. I know You are near me and in me, immersed in my unworthiness. I deeply adore You. I thank You for the many grace You have accorded me and for all the graces, spiritual and material, You in Your fatherly goodness have prepared to strengthen my weakness. I ask You to forgive the many faults I have committed in the past. I beg the help of Your grace to keep me from offending You in the future and to remain faithful to the promises I have made to You many times. I sincerely renew them today. O Blessed Virgin, Saints in heaven, and especially you, St. Rita, help me make this Holy Exercise devoutly in order to obtain the light of mind and the strength of will to attain my eternal salvation. Amen.

### Life: Days as a Recluse

Made in a Christian way, a pilgrimage is a source of enriching grace. It is a time filled with religious activity, but that time soon comes to an end. People then have to resume a normal life.

The main thing is to live your normal life with more heart than before. This is precisely what Rita did.

Returning from Rome, she went back to her convent in Cascia. There she lived the last years of her earthly sojourn and became ever more spiritual.

Rita was scarcely back home when the wound on her forehead opened again. This was an indication from Providence that she was being called to resume her life as a recluse. In her secluded cell she seemed more than ever a stranger to the world and even to the other sisters.

For a recluse such as Rita, the contemplative life appeared to be all that mattered. She allotted all her time to prayer. A biographer remarks that she could not seem to refrain from praying. She consecrated her nights to prayer and, with the coming of dawn, bemoaned the interruption of the heavenly conversations.

Completely spiritualized, she was impervious to the material life. She lived on the Holy Eucharist, which she received often -- at a time when daily Communion was not yet an established custom.

The case of Rita is similar to that of some contemporary mystics. In both there is a strange parallel as regards material things. Just as some people only live for the flesh and the senses and finish by becoming totally materialized, so souls completely lost in God end up, in some sense, by spiritualizing even their body.

The fame of this recluse began to spread. People came in streams to recommend themselves to her. They came to see her even from distant lands. So great was the attraction that the convent became a center of pilgrimage.

Even during her lifetime Rita obtained miracles. For example, a woman came to recommend to her a gravely ill daughter and on returning home found that daughter restored to health. In moments like this, Rita's physical sufferings became more acute by a mysterious Communion of Saints and interchanging of merits.

Because, in spite of herself, she attracted so many people, what Jesus once said of Himself is applicable to Rita: "When I am lifted up from earth [when I am crucified], I will draw all to Myself" (John 12:32). And on another occasion: "If anyone believes in Me, rivers of living water will flow from him" (John 7:38).

### **Reflection: The Contribution of Contemplatives**

We do not believe enough in this influence of mystic souls. We tend to attach value only to what is visibly useful. We understand, for example, the dedication of hospital Sisters. The contemplative life we find hard to understand.

It seems normal to us that God has called men and women to make Him known and loved, for example, parish priests and missionaries.

On the other hand, we have little understanding of persons who do not feel themselves called to the direct apostolate yet leave the world to pursue a life of prayer. These are the contemplatives, who add some manual work to their life to support themselves and do good around them.

Such people are called by God to the contemplative life. That call is made known by an attraction to this kind of life and an aptitude for it.

The collective influence exercised by men and women religious is a positive force. Only those who never have had anything to do with a convent or monastery can be ignorant of this.

In our materialistic world, abbeys and convents are like oases where spiritual things thrive. People drained by the secular life go there to regain their lost energy. Some great nations, for example, England, were evangelized solely by monasteries planted on their soil when they did not yet know Jesus.

Today, a serious retreat of some day's duration in a monastery or convent is one of the best means of change for people who are Christian by habit alone and feel that true Christianity has to be something other than what they are practicing.

Our life needs to be directed more toward God. To make this happen there is nothing like living awhile in the surroundings of a community of men or women who have understood that the "one thing necessary" is to know God and live increasingly in union with Him and in intense charity with their brothers and sisters.

**Prayer: To Discover What God Expects of Us**

O St. Rita, on this earth you never exercised the true apostolate so much as when you were a recluse. Make us understand that the Lord does not want our works as much as He wants our love. Enable us to see that what gives value to our life is not this or that form of the apostolate but our conformity to the Father's will. Help us, then, to find out what the Father expects of each of us. May we follow our vocation not because we want to satisfy our fancy but because it is primarily the expression of the Divine will. May we not fall into illusion but know how to distinguish between our possibilities and our true aptitudes. Obtain for us, O St. Rita, the grace to see clearly and to make use of the gift of counsel from our Confirmation, so that always and everywhere we may give our life the maximum of fruitfulness. We know we will succeed in this if in all things we seek to know the Father's will and conform to it. Help us in our quest to do so. Amen.

## Thirteenth Thursday

### Preparatory Prayer

O my God, Whose splendor fills heaven and earth, I believe You are present here. I know You are near me and in me, immersed in my unworthiness. I deeply adore You. I thank You for the many grace You have accorded me and for all the graces, spiritual and material, You in Your fatherly goodness have prepared to strengthen my weakness. I ask You to forgive the many faults I have committed in the past. I beg the help of Your grace to keep me from offending You in the future and to remain faithful to the promises I have made to You many times. I sincerely renew them today. O Blessed Virgin, Saints in heaven, and especially you, St. Rita, help me make this Holy Exercise devoutly in order to obtain the light of mind and the strength of will to attain my eternal salvation. Amen.

### Life: Final Miracles -- Roses and Figs

After her Roman pilgrimage, as we have seen, Rita lived as a recluse during which she became increasingly spiritualized. She suffered much, but she bore her suffering with good cheer.

Nevertheless, it is idle now to look for her in the fasts and mortifications that marked the prime of her life but had become things of the past because of her physical condition. She was an elderly woman filled with pains and could only accept the trials that flowed therefrom.

Rita understood "good suffering," the kind by which the Christian shares in the redemptive work of Christ. Like St. Paul, she could say: "I rejoice in the sufferings I endure for you. In my own flesh I fill up what is still lacking in regard to the sufferings of Christ, for the sake of His Body, the Church" (Colossians 1:24).

Her last winter was one of those hard seasons encountered in Cascia, which sometimes is cut off from the rest of the world by a huge accumulation of snow.

A cousin, a gracious woman, came to see Rita and asked, "What can I do for you?" She replied: "I would like a rose from my little garden." The cousin thought Rita was delirious.

The cousin went back to Roccaporena and had forgotten the request when, by chance, she was walking near the former garden of St. Rita. And there, in the garden, was a bright red rose on one of the rosebushes. The cousin took it and brought it to the ailing Rita.

Today a bronze sculpture commemorates the event and, each year on May 22, roses are blessed before being brought to the sick, just as the cousin brought Rita the rose from the miraculous rosebush.

A cutting from the rosesbush was planted in the garden of the convent of Cascia. For five hundred years, nothing has been able to cause the cutting to die. It has actually grown into an enormous bush of whitish and lovely scented roses.

When the cousin brought back the beautiful rose, Rita said to her: "Since you have been so kind as to bring me the rose, I would like you now to bring me two fresh figs from the fig tree in my garden." Though it was not the time for figs, the fig tree had produced its fruit. Once again a miracle came about. Is not Rita truly "the Saint of the Impossible"?

### **Reflection: The Need to Produce Worthy Fruits of Charity**

This anecdote about the figs contrasts with the Lord's parable about the barren fig tree: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came out looking for a fruit on it but did not find any. He said to the vinedresser, 'Behold, for three years now I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree and found none. Cut it down. Why should it clutter up the ground?'" (Luke 13:6-7).

Too often we are much like this fig tree. We produce so little fruit. We give the impression of being on earth only for the purpose of seeking our petty personal comfort. It was not like this for St. Rita, whose life was so rich in the eyes of God.

Let us be convinced that we have already lost too much time. Sometimes, of course, we have to put ourselves to work. Perhaps we have even worked hard, but it was for selfish ends, for ourselves or our kindred. It was not for God or our neighbor. The time has come to think a little more about others and produce worthy fruits of charity.

One of the kindest works of mercy is to visit people who are suffering, the sick, the aged, the lonely, and open to them our heart and, when necessary, our purse. Let us bring them the blessed roses of St. Rita, but let us also bring them our encompassing understanding.

May we really be charitable; that will be the best way to show that we are truly Christian. Let us not forget that often a visit to a suffering person is more pleasing to God than lengthy prayers.

### **Prayer: To See Christ in Others**

O St. Rita, you made such good use of your life. Help us not to be barren fig trees. Make us understand the Divine words of the Gospel. "What does it profit anyone to gain the whole world and suffer the loss of one's soul?" (Matthew 16:26). "Lay up a treasure that will not fail you in heaven where no thief comes near nor any moth destroys" (Luke 12:33). Make us understand that we lay up this treasure mostly through goodness to others, through patience and alms. All your life, O St. Rita, you were at the service of the sick and the aged. Help us to imitate you. Give us the will to visit people who are lonely and

people who are suffering. May our approach to them be a source of comfort and joy. Gladden our heart so that we may find, when we are near these people, the words that fit, the words that console and elevate them to God. May we also deprive ourselves now and then so as to bring people who lack the necessities the help of our alms. Make us see the Lord in all the poor and needy, and make us have for them the same respect and love we would have in the presence of the very Person of Jesus Christ. Change our hearts, which are still too hard; warm them by contact with the fire of Christian charity. By loving our brothers and sisters in truth and in practice, may we come to join in the heavenly Kingdom those who, like yourself, practiced goodness and charity on earth. Amen.

## Fourteenth Thursday

### Preparatory Prayer

O my God, Whose splendor fills heaven and earth, I believe You are present here. I know You are near me and in me, immersed in my unworthiness. I deeply adore You. I thank You for the many grace You have accorded me and for all the graces, spiritual and material, You in Your fatherly goodness have prepared to strengthen my weakness. I ask You to forgive the many faults I have committed in the past. I beg the help of Your grace to keep me from offending You in the future and to remain faithful to the promises I have made to You many times. I sincerely renew them today. O Blessed Virgin, Saints in heaven, and especially you, St. Rita, help me make this Holy Exercise devoutly in order to obtain the light of mind and the strength of will to attain my eternal salvation. Amen.

### Life: The True Day of Birth

For us, Christians with a vision overly focused on this world, death is the great expiration, painful and often dreaded. For Saints, it is the day of their birth in heaven and, later, the day of their feast, when the Christian community joyfully sings their praises.

May 22 is a date dear to all friends of St. Rita because on that date, in the year 1457, she took her flight to heaven. Some biographers say that three days earlier our Lord appeared to her in the company of the Blessed Virgin. Questions crossed her mind:

"When, Jesus, can I possess You forever? When can I come into Your presence?"

"Soon, but not yet."

"Well, when?"

"In three days you will be with Me in heaven."

The assurance brought great joy to Rita. The waiting was about to be over, and she felt serene.

Rita asked for Viaticum and the Sacrament of the Sick. She received them in the presence of the community and took the occasion to exhort her Sisters to observe the Rule of the Order. Then, folding her hands, she asked a blessing from her Abbess. No sooner had she received it than she quietly expired.

It was a Saturday, day of the Virgin. Evening Prayer 1 of the following Sunday had just begun. Outside, roses were in bloom. Some witnesses conversant with the process of canonization said that several persons had seen her soul ascend in glory.

Be that as it may, we can apply to this holy death a text found in the Song of Songs (2:10; 2:2): "Arise, make haste, My beloved, My dove, My beautiful one, and come. Like a lily among thorns, beautiful is My beloved."

Above the high altar of the basilica in Cascia, a large and beautiful fresco shows St. Rita nestled at the feet of the glorious Christ. It was the moment when she could say: "I am seated in the shadow of the One I desired" (Song of Songs 2:3).

### **Reflection: The Right Idea about Death**

Saints welcome death. If we tremble at the prospect of the great departure to the Beyond, it is precisely because we are not Saints.

In thinking about death, we show how uncertain our faith still is. We ask ourselves what we are going to find on the other side.

Far different is the way of those who, while on earth, have lived for heaven. St. Paul was among them. That is why he could say: "I desire to die and be with Christ" (Philippians 1:23).

St. Bernadette said: "The Blessed Virgin is so beautiful that when we have seen her once, we want to see her again." The reaction of the little seers at Fatima was the same. They asked the "Beautiful Lady" of the apparition to take them back with her to Paradise.

We could apply to these manifestations of faith the antiphon sung at the Easter Vigil: "Like a deer that longs for running streams, my soul longs for You, my God. Athirst is my soul for God, the living God. When shall I go and behold the face of God?" (Psalm 42:2-3).

If we do not want to fear death, we must first make our faith stronger. The best way to do this is to comport ourselves as true Christians and bring about a real conformity between our beliefs and our life. In short, we must create a harmony within ourselves.

Too often there is a kind of discord between our external piety and a life of deep faith. Because we lack this deep faith, we are fearful of death when it begins to show itself. We perceive that we are like the foolish virgins of the Gospel parable and that our lamps are empty (Matthew 25:1-13).

Yet many times we have repeated: "Lord! Lord!" We have multiplied formulas of prayers, novenas, and invocations, and have offered candles. However, we have not done the principal thing -- the Father's will in all areas of life.

We need to do the Father's will in the matter of justice and charity, in almsgiving, in purity, in the forgiving of wrongs, and in the loving abandonment to Providence.

Because we have failed in these matters, death makes us fearful. But there is still time to regain our self-control. That is always possible. Let us, then turn to the Lord in prayer.

**Prayer: To Prepare for a Good Death**

Dear God, the thought of death frightens me. And so I come to You with a repentant soul. I would live to live the rest of my life with increasing acceptance of death. I wish very much for an end like that of Your Saints, in serenity and joy, but I have not been much of a Saint so far. I want with all my heart to strive to become holy, at least to some degree. I sense that faith must be in proportion to true generosity. It takes a great deal of faith to die with joy. Dear God, make my soul truly generous. Help me to take Your Gospel ever more seriously and to make it enter into all the details of my life. By the merits of St. Rita I beseech You, dear God, to deliver me and the ones I love from the calamity of a sudden death. May I, on the contrary, prepare myself in all serenity for the day that will free me from the miseries of life. May I then be united with You and Your Saints in the "place of refreshment, light, and peace," where all who have showed love on earth will find each other again forever. Amen.

## **Fifteenth Thursday**

### **Preparatory Prayer**

O my God, Whose splendor fills heaven and earth, I believe You are present here. I know You are near me and in me, immersed in my unworthiness. I deeply adore You. I thank You for the many grace You have accorded me and for all the graces, spiritual and material, You in Your fatherly goodness have prepared to strengthen my weakness. I ask You to forgive the many faults I have committed in the past. I beg the help of Your grace to keep me from offending You in the future and to remain faithful to the promises I have made to You many times. I sincerely renew them today. O Blessed Virgin, Saints in heaven, and especially you, St. Rita, help me make this Holy Exercise devoutly in order to obtain the light of mind and the strength of will to attain my eternal salvation. Amen.

### **Life: The Vine in Flower Has Spread Its Perfume**

May 22, 1457 was, as we have seen, the "true day of birth" of our Saint, the hour of her glorification. Rita had scarcely breathed her last when the prodigies began.

The convent clock was said to have struck three times, though no one had touched it. Rita's "little cell" as filled with an extraordinary light. This brings to mind the "perpetual light" into which the deceased Saint had just entered.

A perfume no less strange also filled the cell, which had until then been permeated with the nauseating odor that was so offensive. The perfume indicated that Rita died "in the odor of sanctity" in the literal as well as the figurative sense.

The fetid wound was suddenly healed. Not only did the oozing stop, but the Stigmata of the thorn became like a precious stone of bright red. "You have placed on [her] head a crown of precious stones," sings the Psalmist (Psalm 21:4).

One of the Sisters of the convent had a paralyzed arm. Her name was Sister Catherine Mancini. Despite this infirmity, she wanted to embrace her companion, who may have been a relative.

She tried to put her arm around the neck of the deceased Rita and succeeded perfectly, having that very moment regained the use of her arm. This was the first miracle obtained by Rita.

While the body was being washed and prepared for burial, the people of Cascia waited impatiently. They wanted to see her whom everybody was already calling "The Saint."

Her remains were taken to a chapel of the convent and, so that everyone could see her, the coffin was not closed. This was supposed to be only for a short time, but it lasted 138 years.

A few years after being left open, the coffin was damaged by fire but the body remained intact. "Up to the present," writes Monsignor De Marchi in our day, "and consequently for more than a half millennium, the sentence against the children of Adam has not come about for Rita: 'You are dust and to dust you shall return'" Her body remains incorrupt.

This preservation is truly exceptional. In 1626, hence more than 150 years after the death, the body was examined. Among other things, the examiner's report noted: "The white flesh was seen perfectly... the eyes with the pupils... and the whole face as nicely arranged as a person who died that same day. Also seen were the hands of the said servant of God, white and intact, and the fingers with the nails could be perfectly counted..."

The best historian of St. Rita, Cavallucci, who wrote about the same time -- 1626 -- says he can testify that at each opening of the coffin a perfume "like an odoriferous mixture" escaped from it. Moreover, he adds, each time an important grace was obtained through the intercession of the Saint, this perfume was detected by a smell inside the convent several days before.

At present, the skin is still intact and well preserved. The face simply appears a little dried up and a little black. The body rests in a glass case placed in a chapel of the new basilica built in 1925.

It should further be noted that -- according to oral tradition -- on several occasions the Saint has been seen opening her eyes and sometimes turning her head or moving her hands and feet. This is called the "Miracle of the Movements."

At the time of Rita's death there were no official canonizations. It was, so to speak, the voice of the people that declared anyone a Saint. Rita, it can be said, was first beatified by the people, whereupon the Bishop of Spoleto authorized her veneration. The first church intended specifically for the placement of the Saint's body was built in the late sixteenth century.

Before long, May 22 became, so to speak, a national holiday of Italy. The official beatification was made by Urban VIII in 1628, and the canonization by Leo XIII in 1900. Since this later date -- 1900 -- veneration of St. Rita has grown wonderfully throughout the world.

### **Reflection: The School of the Saints**

In 1957, the unforgettable festivities of the fifth centenary of the Saint's death took place in Cascia. The year before, Pope Pius XII sent, for this occasion, a magnificent letter to the very Reverend Superior General of the Augustinians.

In his letter the Sovereign Pontiff held up St. Rita as model for the whole world because, he wrote, in her life are found examples for all situations. She was a young girl, a wife, mother, widow, and nun. She faced and overcame the trials that can afflict a human existence in all these states of life.

Such a life deserves to be studied and imitated, but the emphasis should be on imitation. Our Saints, that is, ought not to be mere subjects of admiring curiosity.

Nor should they be seen primarily as "miracle workers." They are not "sorcerers of heaven" (title of a film on the Cure of Ars), or supernatural beings who have to be made favorable toward us and whom we honor mostly because of personal interest.

In reality, our Saints are, before all else, "Witnesses of God." Their life shows what the Lord's grace can bring about in a soul that does not try to flee such grace.

What the Saints have done we can do, even if the circumstances are different. We have at our disposal the same Divine gifts and the same means.

It is simply a matter of having the courage to use the gifts and the means. Above all the rest, courage is what we should ask for from our Saints.

We should approach them as good pupils in their school, not as beggars who only ask for material favors.

If we are good pupils in the School of the Saints, would that not be the best means of making them favorable toward us? Then the school would enjoy the admirable "Communion of Saints."

On the strength of this Communion, people in heaven help their needy brothers and sisters on earth to come and join them, and people on earth congratulate their glorious brothers and sisters and strive to come and be with them, in perpetual light and perfect joy.

### **Prayer: To Imitate St. Rita in Bearing Witness to Christ**

As we come, dear God, to the end of the story of a Saint loved by all, we want first to thank You. Amid the troubled times in which we live, St. Rita's life has given us hope and courage. She has shown us that human beings can practice virtues and gain merit. Because of St. Rita we begin to see, dear God, a little more of the mystery of Your Church. We have been taught that Your Church is nothing less than Your Son continuing His Incarnation in the history of the world. We have also been taught, dear God, that all of us are members of Your Son's Mystical Body. Sometimes, in the past, it has been difficult for us to believe in this magnificent truth of our Creed. The reason was that we considered only ourselves with our sins, our meanness, our tepidity. We told ourselves that we were not fit to be members of Christ's Mystical Body. Then, dear God, we discovered in our Sister Rita a wonderful reflection of Your Word

made flesh. Like Him, she had no other will than Yours and no other love than the love that reigns among the three Divine Persons and shines upon the world. We have seen her good and gentle even when she was so badly treated in return. We have seen her patient, solely preoccupied with the salvation of her dear ones. We have seen her helpful to the disinherited and becoming poor solely to be enriched by the supernatural riches of Christ. Her life consisted in modeling herself on Him. She was truly what every baptized person should be: another Christ. Having seen what she did and what she was, we now understand that Christians like her are truly the kind of members Christ seeks in order to form His Church, which is His Mystical Body. Through St. Rita, we humbly ask of You, dear God, that, like her, each of us may be a useful member of Your Church. Amen.

### **Prayer to St. Rita**

O St. Rita, help us and all the ones we love to accomplish the plan of Love that God desires for each one of us. Amen.