

SAINT RITA OF CASCIA

Advocate of the impossible

Her birth

ST RITA OF CASCIA is universally called the 'Saint of the Impossible', because her intercession has been found effectual with God in most desperate and hopeless cases. Born in Rocca Porena in the diocese of Spoleto, Italy, about the year 1381, Rita came to her parents, already advanced in age, as the answer to many years of prayer. The piety and charity of her father and mother were so well known that they were called the 'peace-makers' of their little village.

On the day after Rita's baptism, as she lay in her cradle, a swarm of pure white bees alighted on her face and went in and out of her slightly opened mouth, as if to take honey from her lips. Doubtless this was to typify the sweetness of word and manner which later was to win for God so many souls, and the comfort she was to diffuse throughout the world.

Example for virgins

Rita's parents gave her a good home training. At an early age she felt drawn to God, and spent many hours in the parish church. She did not care for the pastimes and sports of youth, and was free from vanity and love of fine clothes. Rita's obedience to her parents was remarkable. At a tender age Rita began to perform bodily penances, particularly fasting. She gave alms to the poor, for whom she always showed most loving compassion. When only ten years old, she felt drawn to retirement and to a cloistered life, but love for her aged parents prevented her from making known her desires.

With her parents' permission Rita fitted up a small oratory where she prayed and meditated. In this solitude her love for Jesus Crucified and her compassion for his bitter sufferings daily became more ardent. But after a year her duty of assisting her parents forced her from her loved solitude.

The desire to join a community of Augustinian nuns at Cascia was daily growing in Rita's mind. But, pious though they were, her parents were deeply grieved at the thought of this separation. Tearful pleadings and the weight of their parental authority prevailed; they even induced her to marry. Hitherto Rita had been a model of virginal purity, filial love, reverence and obedience. She had now to follow another path, to become a bright example of virtue to all who lived in the married state.

Model for mothers

The young man selected as Rita's husband was passionate and quick-tempered, one well suited to try the patience and virtue of a saint. Just a few days after their marriage, he began to ill-treat her. It was only her love for the Crucified One that enabled her to bear this heavy cross. Sweetness of temper was the weapon she used to combat her husband's cruelty. After many years, her virtue and long-suffering at length won her husband's heart and brought unity and love into their home.

Gradually, to her great anxiety, Rita noticed that her two sons had inherited their father's quarrelsome disposition. She spared neither vigilance, words, nor punishments to curb their self-willed dispositions. She performed penances for their welfare, and was unwearied in acts of charity towards her neighbour.

Pattern for widows

After eighteen years of married life, Rita's husband was barbarously slain a short distance from their home. Grief filled Rita's heart, particularly because of the uncertainty of his readiness to meet his Judge. But soon her trust in divine providence triumphed, and she bowed in resignation to God's design. She generously pardoned the murderers of her husband and sought pardon for them from divine mercy.

To her consternation Rita discovered that her two sons, though young in years, were plotting vengeance against those who had murdered their father. In spite of all her advice and solicitude, the sorrowing mother could not touch her children's vengeful hearts. In her grief, she turned to God and besought him either to change her children's hearts or to take them from this world before they could accomplish the vengeance they were plotting.

Rita's prayer was answered. Within a year both sons died, and, though touched by natural sorrow, she thanked God for taking them away from the dangers of sin and the risk of eternal damnation.

Rita's life as a widow was short. During that time she spent herself in works of charity for her neighbour, in penances and in fasting. She lived in retirement and wore coarse mourning garments. Her former burning desire to enter the cloister now grew more vehement. She sought admission among the Augustinian nuns of Cascia, but was several times rejected. It was not their custom to receive widows.

Miraculous entry into the convent

One night, St John the Baptist, to whom Rita had been devoted from childhood, St Augustine and St Nicholas of Tolentino appeared to Rita. They conducted her to the convent of Cascia. Bolted gates and doors opened at their touch, and they left Rita in the chapel of the Augustinian nuns. What was the surprise of the Sisters the next morning on finding the oft-repulsed widow within their enclosure! Her miraculous entry being too evident to doubt God's designs in her regard, they now accepted her unanimously.

The perfect religious

In her religious life, Rita excelled in the perfect observance of her Rule and the holy vows, in charity for God and her sisters, in profound humility and sacrificial labour. Love of our suffering Saviour urged Rita to perform heroic penances. She possessed the spirit of prayer and contemplation in a high degree. In her cell she devised a little mountain with a cross to remind her of our Saviour's torments in his Passion. With tearful compassion she followed our Lord, in spirit, to Calvary and to death.

Miraculous wound

In 1443, when Rita attained her sixty-second year, God placed his seal upon her merits by a singular privilege. Once when the holy nun heard a sermon on the sufferings of our divine Saviour, compassion so filled her that she went to her cell to weep bitterly before the crucifix. She besought her Beloved, crowned with thorns, to let her share his torture. Thereupon one of the thorns from the crucifix detached itself and penetrated the left side of Rita's forehead. She swooned from pain. This wound festered and emitted a foul odour, making it necessary for Rita to live apart from the community. It was humiliating but she bore it with joy until death and was happy in her solitude. When Rita wished to go to Rome to gain the jubilee indulgence, the wound healed almost instantly, and after her return reopened, proving its miraculous origin.

During the last five years of her life the saint was bedridden most of the time. Once an acquaintance asked if she wished anything. 'Yes', Rita answered, 'go to the garden of my house, at Rocca Porena; pluck a rose there and bring it to me'. It was in the month of January during the rigours of winter. Amazed, the woman went and to her utter astonishment, found a full-blown red rose amidst the frozen bushes. She hastened to bring it to Rita, who joyfully took it as coming from the hands of her divine Spouse.

Another time Rita bade a woman bring her two figs from the same garden. Actually finding two ripe figs on a leafless tree, the woman plucked them with awe and pleasure and carried them to the sick nun. The religious and the people of the vicinity, on hearing of this second wonder praised God and conceived a great veneration for the dying saint.

Three days before Rita's death, Our Lord, accompanied by the Blessed Virgin, appeared to her and promised her the joys of heaven. Rita died May 22, 1457, aged seventy-six years, forty-four of which had been spent in the religious life.

Miracles after death

Crowds hastened to venerate Rita's body before its burial. The noxious wound in the forehead now shone like a brilliant jewel and exhaled a heavenly fragrance. A close relative of Rita's confidently leaned over the holy body and at once recovered the use of her arms which had been paralysed for many years! Many other astounding miracles were wrought before the remains were entombed. Rita was solemnly beatified on July 16, 1628.

In late years devotion to St Rita has increased, and she has won for herself the title: Saint of the Impossible. Many instances are related of how the saint rendered aid in the last adversities. Conversions of hardened sinners and of those who had led dissolute lives are no less numerous than cures of bodily ills.

Canonisation of St Rita

The universal devotion to St Rita and the many wonders wrought through her intercession enkindled in the hearts of the thousands of devotees of the humble Augustinian nun the ardent desire to see her elevated to the honours of the altar. Great was their joy when on May 24, 1990 the Decree of Canonisation was published. Her feast is celebrated on May 22.

In conclusion, we quote these memorable words from the Decree: 'St Rita of Cascia as maiden, wife, mother and nun was so pleasing and so beloved by Jesus Christ that he deigned to signalise her not only with the seal of his love, but especially with the seal of his Passion. St Rita merited this great privilege on account of her singular humility, her complete detachment and her admirable penance. However, the virtues which made St Rita particularly pleasing to God were her love for her neighbour and her devotion to Jesus Crucified.'

DEVOTIONS IN HONOUR OF ST RITA

NOVENA PRAYERS TO ST RITA

One or several of the following may be used as a novena.

O holy protectress of those who are in utmost need! Shining as a star of hope in the midst of darkness, in patience and fortitude, like the patriarch Job; scourge of devils; health of the sick; deliverer of those in extreme need; wonder of saints and model of all states! With confident trust and firmly united to the adorable will of God, I implore thy help, through the merits of my Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, and in particular of that painful Crown of Thorns which thou contemplated with tender devotion. Through the merits of the Blessed Virgin Mary and thine own graces and virtues, I implore thee heart and soul to obtain my earnest petition, if it be for the greater glory of God and my salvation (there make your request).

Guide and purify my intentions, O holy protectress and most dear advocate, that I may obtain the pardon of all my sins and the grace to persevere daily, as thou didst, in walking with courage, generosity, and unwavering fidelity upon the heavenward path on which Our Lord desires to lead me. Amen.

INVOCATIONS TO ST RITA

St Rita, advocate of the impossible, pray for us.

Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory be to the Father . . . (three times).

PRAYER TO ST RITA

Holy patroness of those in need, St Rita, so humble, pure and patient, whose pleadings with thy divine Spouse are irresistible, obtain for us from our Crucified Lord our request. (Mention it.) Be propitious towards us for the greater glory of God, and we promise to honour thee and to sing thy praises forever. Amen.

Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory be to the Father . . . (three times).

LITANY IN HONOUR OF ST RITA

For private use only

Lord, have mercy.

Christ, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

Christ, hear us.

Christ, graciously hear us.

God the Father Almighty, have mercy on us.

God the Son, Redeemer of the world, who said: 'Ask, and you shall receive, seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you,' have mercy on us.

God the Holy Ghost, Spirit of wisdom, understanding, counsel and knowledge, have mercy on us.

Holy Trinity, one God, infinite in power, have mercy on us.

Holy Mary, who never refuses a petition, pray for us.

Immaculate virgin, Queen of heaven and earth, pray for us.

Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, pray for us.

Holy Angels, spirits of humility, pray for us.

Holy Principalities, protectors of religious communities, pray for us.

Holy Virtues, angels of fortitude, pray for us.

Holy Cherubim, angels of light, pray for us.

St Rita, advocate of the impossible, pray for us.

St Rita, consecrated to God, pray for us.

St Rita, bride of the suffering Saviour, pray for us.

St Rita, filled with compassion for the sufferings of Christ, pray for us.

St Rita, crowned by an angel with a crown of thorns, pray for us.

St Rita, who bore the wounds of His mysterious crown on thy forehead, pray for us.

St Rita, who firmly trusted in the loving mercy of Jesus, pray for us.

St Rita, who importuned the dying Saviour with ardent supplications, pray for us.

St Rita, who never doubted a gracious answer to thy prayer, pray for us.

That we may renounce all self-love, pray for us, St Rita.

That we may confidently trust in the promise of Jesus, pray for us, St Rita.

That the enemies of our salvation may be put to confusion, pray for us, St Rita.

That we may ever perfectly fulfil the will of God, pray for us, St Rita.

That our inclinations to evil may be destroyed, pray for us, St Rita.

That the Faith in all its purity may be spread over our land, pray for us, St Rita.

That holy zeal may fill our hearts, pray for us, St Rita.

That we may infuse a holy love for chastity into all who come in contact with us, pray for us, St Rita.

That in all our actions and omissions we may endeavour to promote a tender charity, pray for us, St Rita.

That we may be delivered from all avarice, vainglory and rash judgment, pray for us, St Rita.

That great saints may rise in our land, who will edify the people and dispel the darkness of unbelief, pray for us, St Rita.

That we may be delivered from all interior enemies, pray for us, St Rita.

Lamb of God, Who takest away the sins of the world, spare us, O Lord.

Lamb of God, Who takest away the sins of the world, graciously hear us, O Lord.

Lamb of God, Who takest away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.

V. Pray for us, St Rita.

R. That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.

Let us pray

O God, who in Thine infinite tenderness deign to hearken to the prayer of St Rita and to grant to her supplication that which seems impossible to human foresight, skill and efforts, in reward for her compassionate love and firm reliance upon Thy promise; have pity upon our adversity and succour us in our calamities, that unbelievers may know that Thou art the recompenser of the humble, the defence of the helpless and the strength of those who trust in Thee. Through Jesus Christ Our Lord. Amen.

PRAYER TO ST RITA

O glorious St Rita, who shared in a marvellous manner the sorrowful Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, obtain for

me the grace to suffer in patience the miseries of this life, and be my refuge in all my necessities. Amen.

Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory be to the Father . . . (three times).

SAINT DYMPHNA

Patroness of those afflicted with nervous and mental disorders

ISLE OF SAINTS has long been a title popularly given to the island evangelised by St Patrick, which nestles in the blue waters of the Atlantic. And appropriately it is so called, for the names of Irish saints would more than fill the Church's calendar. Yet Catholics for the most part are entirely unfamiliar with so many of these glorious saints. One such forgotten or unknown saint, who, on account of her spotless virtue and glorious martyrdom, is sometimes referred to as the 'Lily of Eire', is St Dymphna. True, the records of the life and martyrdom of this holy virgin are for the most part meagre and unsatisfactory, but sufficient is known regarding the principal facts of her life and of her many well-authenticated miracles to attest to an exalted sanctity.

Favoured by nature and grace

Dymphna was born in the sixth century, when Ireland was almost entirely Catholic. Yet, strange to say, her father, a petty king of Oriel, was still a pagan. On the other hand, her mother, a descendant of a noble family, was a devout Christian, remarkable both for her piety and her great beauty. Dymphna, like her mother, was a paragon of beauty and a most sweet and winning child, the 'jewel' of her home. Every affection and attention was lavished upon her from birth.

Heaven, too, favoured the child with special graces. Dymphna was early placed under the care and tutelage of a pious christian woman who prepared her for baptism, which was conferred by the saintly Father Gerebran. The latter, who seems to have been a member of the household, later taught little Dymphna her letters along with the truths of religion. Dymphna, a bright and eager pupil, advanced rapidly in wisdom and grace.

When still very young, Dymphna, like so many other Irish maidens before and after her, being filled with fervour and love for Jesus Christ, chose him for her divine Spouse, and consecrated her virginity to him and to his blessed Mother by a vow of chastity.

Sorrows and trials

It was not long, however, before an unexpected cloud overshadowed the happy childhood of the beautiful girl. Her mother died and Dymphna shed many secret tears over this bereavement. At the same time, however, she found great comfort in her faith which already had taken deep root.

Dymphna's father, too, was in mourning for his deceased wife for a long time. At length he was persuaded by his counsellors to seek solace in a second marriage. So he commissioned certain people of his court to search for a woman who would be like his first spouse in beauty and character. After visiting many countries in vain, the messengers returned, saying that they could find none so charming and amiable as his own lovely daughter, Dymphna. Giving ear to their base suggestions, the king conceived the evil design to marry Dymphna. With persuasive and flattering words he manifested his purpose to her. As may be expected, Dymphna was greatly horrified at the suggestion; but to avoid incurring her father's wrath by outright refusal, she asked for a period of forty days in which to consider the proposal. She had recourse to Father Gerebran immediately. He advised her to flee her native country and since the danger was imminent, to make no delay.

With all speed, therefore, Dymphna set out for the Continent, accompanied by Father Gerebran and the court jester and his wife. After a favourable passage, they landed on the coast near the present city of Antwerp. Having stopped for a short rest, they resumed their journey and came to a little village named Gheel. Here they were hospitably received and began to make plans for making it their permanent residence.

In the meantime the king discovered Dymphna's flight. Filled with rage, he set out with his followers in search of the fugitives. After some time they were traced to Belgium, and their place of refuge was located. At first Dymphna's father tried to persuade her to return with him; but Father Gerebran sternly rebuked him for his wicked intentions.

Whereupon he gave orders that Father Gerebran should be put to death. Without delay his wicked retainers laid violent hands upon the priest and struck him on the neck with a sword. With one blow of the steel the head was severed from the shoulders, and another glorious martyr went to join the illustrious heroes of Christ's kingdom.

Martyred by her father

Further attempts on the part of Dymphna's father to induce her to return with him proved fruitless. With undaunted courage she spurned his enticing promises and scorned his cruel threats. Infuriated by her resistance, the father drew a dagger from his belt and with his own hand struck off the head of his child. Recommending her soul to the mercy of God, the holy virgin fell prostrate at the feet of her insanely raving father. Thus the glorious crown of martyrdom was accorded to St Dymphna in the fifteenth year of her life, on the fifteenth day of May, between 620 and 640. The day of her death has been assigned as her feast-day.

The records of Dymphna's life and death say that the bodies of the two martyred saints lay on the ground for quite some time after their death, until the inhabitants of Gheel removed them to a cave, which was the customary manner of interment in that part of the world at the time. But after several years had elapsed, the villagers, recalling their holy deaths, decided to give the bodies a more suitable burial. When the workmen removed the heap of black earth at the cave's entrance they were astonished to find two beautiful tombs, whiter than snow, which were carved from stone. When the coffin of St Dymphna was opened, there was found lying on her breast a red tile bearing the inscription: 'Here lies the holy virgin and martyr, Dymphna.' The remains of the saint were placed in a small church. Later, necessity obliged the erection of the magnificent 'Church of St Dymphna' which now stands on the site where the bodies were first buried. St Dymphna's relics repose there in a beautiful golden reliquary.

Patroness of the mentally afflicted

Miracles and cures began to occur in continually increasing numbers. Gradually St Dymphna's fame as patroness of victims of nervous and mental disorders was spread from country to country. More and more, mentally afflicted persons were brought to the shrine by relatives and friends, many coming in pilgrimages from far-distant places. Novenas were made and St Dymphna's relic was applied to the patients. The remarkable cures reported caused confidence in the saint to grow daily. At first the patients were lodged in a small annex built onto the church. Then gradually it came about that they were placed in the homes of the families living in Gheel.

From this beginning Gheel developed to become a town world-famed for its care of the insane and mentally afflicted. An institution called the 'Infirmary of St Elizabeth', conducted by the Sisters of St Augustine, was later built for the hospital care of the patients. Most of the patients, after some time spent in the institution, are placed in one or other of the families of Gheel, where they lead a comparatively normal life. Every home in Gheel is proud to welcome to its family circle such patients as are ready to return to the environment of family life. Generations of experience have given the people of Gheel an intimate and tender skill in dealing with their changes. Their remarkable spirit of charity and Christ-like love for these afflicted members of society is a lesson to our modern-day world, so prone to put its whole reliance on science and to forget the principles of true Christian charity.

Renowned psychiatrists testify that a surprisingly large number of patients could leave mental institutions if they could be assured of a sympathetic reception in the world, such as the people of Gheel take pride in showing. In fact, psychiatrists state that institutions can help certain cases only to a given extent; and when that point is reached, they must have help from persons outside if the progress made in the institution is to be permanently effective. Gheel is the living confirmation of this statement and an exemplar of the gospel teaching on charity.

DEVOTIONS IN HONOUR OF ST DYMPHNA

LITANY IN HONOUR OF ST DYMPHNA

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Lord, have mercy.

Christ, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

Christ, have mercy.

Christ, graciously hear us.

God the Father of Heaven, have mercy on us.

God the Son, Redeemer of the world, have mercy on us.

God the Holy Spirit, have mercy on us.

Holy Trinity, one God, have mercy on us.

Holy Mary, virgin and mother of God, pray for us.

Health of the sick, pray for us.

Comfortress of the afflicted, pray for us.

Help of Christians, pray for us.

St Dymphna, virgin and martyr, pray for us.

St Dymphna, daughter of royal parents, pray for us.

St Dymphna, child of great beauty of soul and body, pray for us.

St Dymphna, docile to the lessons of thy pious mother, pray for us.

St Dymphna, obedient to your saintly confessor, pray for us.

St Dymphna, who abandoned the court of thy father to escape the danger of impurity, pray for us.

St Dymphna, who chose a life of poverty on earth so that thou might lay up treasures in heaven, pray for us.

St Dymphna, who sought strength and consolation in Holy Mass, Holy Communion and prayer, pray for us.

St Dymphna, ardent lover of the divine Bridegroom, pray for us.

St Dymphna, devoted to the Mother of God, pray for us.

St Dymphna, beheaded by thine own father, pray for us.

St Dymphna, martyr of holy purity, pray for us.

St Dymphna, brilliant example of christian youth, pray for us.

St Dymphna, renowned for many miracles, pray for us.

St Dymphna, glory of Ireland and Belgium, pray for us.

St Dymphna, full of compassion for those in need, pray for us.

St Dymphna, protector against all nervous and mental disorders, pray for us.

St Dymphna, consoler of the afflicted, pray for us.

St Dymphna, friend of the helpless, pray for us.

St Dymphna, comforter of the despondent, pray for us.

St Dymphna, light of those in mental darkness, pray for us.

St Dymphna, patroness of those who suffer from nervous and mental diseases, pray for us.

That we may love the Lord our God with all our hearts and above all things, we beseech thee, hear us.

That we may hate sin and avoid all its occasions, we beseech thee, hear us.

That we may carefully preserve the virtue of purity according to our state, we beseech thee, hear us.

That we may receive the sacraments frequently, we beseech thee, hear us.

That we may obtain the spirit of prayer, we beseech thee, hear us.

That we may be humble and obedient, resigning ourselves to God's holy will, we beseech thee, hear us.

That we may learn to have confidence in God during our affliction, we beseech thee, hear us.

That we may obtain the grace of final perseverance, we beseech thee, hear us.

In moments of temptation, we beseech thee, hear us.

In times of sickness, diseases, war, and persecution, we beseech thee, hear us.

In our last illness, we beseech thee, hear us.

At the hour of death, we beseech thee, hear us.

Lamb of God, Who takest away the sins of the world, spare us, O Lord.

Lamb of God, Who takest away the sins of the world, graciously hear us, O Lord.

Lamb of God, Who takest away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.

V. Pray for us, St Dymphna.

R. That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.

Let us pray

O God, since Thou gavest St Dymphna to Thy Church as a model of all virtues, especially holy purity, and willed that she should seal her faith with her innocent blood and perform numerous miracles, grant that we who honour her as patroness of those afflicted with nervous and mental illness, may continue to enjoy her powerful intercession and attain eternal life. Through Christ Our Lord, Amen.

PRAYER FOR CONFORMITY TO GOD'S WILL

O God, who led the holy virgin and martyr St Dymphna through danger and trial to her glorious crown in heaven, help us through her intercession to trust in Thee in all the afflictions and trials of our own lives, and by accepting Thy will, to ascend from the darkness of this life to the eternal glory of heaven. Through Christ Our Lord. Amen.

PRAYER IN ANY AFFLICTION

Compassionate St Dymphna, who restored health and soundness of mind to so many through the power of thy heavenly Bridegroom, Jesus Christ, behold me (or mention the person afflicted) in this suffering. Trusting in thy powerful intercession, I beg thee to ask Jesus, the merciful Healer of the sick, to restore me (or . . .) that, helped by this grace I (he, she) may serve Him better and promote devotion to thee together with the many others who have experienced thy help. Amen.

Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory be to the Father ...

PRAYER IN TEMPTATIONS AGAINST PURITY

Lord Jesus Christ, Who hast willed that St Dymphna faithfully preserved the robe of innocence and purity, valiantly resisting all the allurements of evil passions. Help me, too, to overcome all temptations against purity and to remain steadfast in love of Christ, in order to preserve this great gift of God. Implore for me the grace of perseverance in prayer, distrust of myself, and flight from the occasions of sin, and finally the grace of a good death, so that in heaven I may be happy with God for all eternity. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THOSE AFFLICTED WITH MENTAL ILLNESS

Lord Jesus Christ, Who hast willed that St Dymphna should be invoked by thousands of clients as the patroness of nervous and mental diseases and hast brought about that her interest in these patients should be an inspiration to and an ideal of charity at her great shrine and throughout the world. Grant that, through the prayers of this youthful martyr of purity, those who suffer from nervous and mental illness everywhere on earth may be helped and consoled. I recommend to Thee in particular . . . (here mention those you wish to pray for).

Be pleased to hear the prayers of Saint Dymphna and of Thy blessed Mother, Health of the Sick and Comfortress of the Afflicted, in behalf of those whom I recommend to the love and compassion of Thy Sacred Heart. Give them the consolation they need and especially the cure they so much desire, if it be Thy will. May we all serve Thy suffering members with a charity that may merit for us the reward of being united forever in heaven with Thee, Our Divine Head, who livest and reignest with the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit forever. Amen.

O God, we beg Thee through Thy servant, St Dymphna, who sealed with her blood the love she had for Thee, her eternal Spouse, to grant relief to those in our midst who suffer from mental afflictions and nervous disorders.

Through Christ Our Lord. Amen.
