

FIFTEEN THURSDAYS OF ST. RITA

The devout practice of the 15 Thursdays, recall the 15 years in which the saint carried on her forehead the stigmata of the coronation of Jesus: a historical and rich memory of that spirituality that is the theology of the cross, the heart of Christianity.

I Thursdays - MAN IN THE HISTORY OF SALVATION

Why talk about a woman who died more than five centuries ago? What difference does the life of a housewife make, one who lived in a remote village in the mountains of Umbria and whose existence made no noise?

Every man has his own story, because every man is a "unique and unrepeatable word" written by the finger of God. We, the baptized, know that in the history of salvation we are all important, we are all protagonists in the heart of God.

The Bible is the history of the world and of every man; the pilgrim people of Israel in the wilderness is the image of humanity on its journey towards eternity.

The Old Testament presents God as the guardian of Israel; the people enslaved and freed invoke him as the "saving Lord"; the same people on the way to freedom in the promised land called him the "legislator"; Moses proclaims the "God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness", Jesus will call him "Father": "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (Jn 3:16). Divine revelation occurs through words and deeds: the Gospel presents Christ as the full manifestation of God. Man has a duty to respond to the divine initiatives with specific commitments; then God blesses the faithful man, on the contrary there will be a curse for the unfaithful man.

In Rita of Cascia we see the faithful Christian; Rita a woman socially ignored, spiritually misunderstood, humanly pitied. Today we need the example of this woman. The reason is simple: materialism, idolatry and irresponsibility are the three deceptions that are poisoning our society that is totally contrary to the law of God. The man of our time is at a crossroads: is the world guided by God or by the cunning and wickedness of men? In the babel of our society we are assailed by doubts or the temptation to think that maybe the world has escaped God's hands

We are all convinced that it is no longer the time of the Crusades, but we are all convinced that it is necessary to halt the degrade of conscience. The church proclaiming the kingdom of God which is eternal salvation, also brings the Gospel leaven fermenting our society by promoting the conversion of the heart, that does not mean respectability or being free of sin, but a radical change of life renewed in the spirit.

The modern culture of having, of selfish possession shows that the anxiety for happiness inherent in every heart is not satisfied by the abundance of food, by the style of dress and by wealth in general; it should be clear that it is not religion that alienates man, but the delusion of believing as valid those values that prove negative to human dignity and that generate sadness, pessimism and alienation. The gospel is repeated: man is selling Christ for thirty pieces of silver.

Here's the call of Pope John Paul II in his encyclical "Christifideles laici" No. 5: "It's been said that ours is a time of "humanisms": some for their atheistic and secular background, paradoxically end up modifying and nullifying man; many others praise him to the point of reaching forms of real idolatry.

With Jesus, salvation has come into the world, the reconciliation between God and man has taken place, the break has been healed, humanity has set out towards a "new heavens and new earth." The saints remind us that Christians have the mission to "show" Christ present in the world.

In this regard, we read what John Paul II reminds us: "Having received the responsibility of manifesting to the world the mystery of God that shines in Christ Jesus, at the same time the Church reveals man to himself, makes known the meaning of his existence, opening him to the whole truth about himself and his destiny. In this perspective the Church is called, in virtue of its very mission of evangelization, to serve man. This service is rooted primarily in the miraculous and shocking fact that "by his Incarnation the Son of God has united himself in some fashion with every man."

(Christifideles laici n° 36)

Rita of Cascia, while living at the margins of her society, was able to follow Christ, following the road, not always easy, of the gospel as the only signpost of her earthly journey. The faith of our saint was no escape, it was not a search for comforting serenity, it was a silent witness yet one able to arouse questions in many consciences due to the absence of God. The laywoman from Roccaporena had her place as a simple worker in the vineyard of the Lord. With this Christological premise we can easily understand and follow the path of the fifteen Thursdays of Saint Rita in preparation for the feast of May 22. The Ritian path, above all an evangelical one.

PRAYER

Lord, we begin the journey of faith and purification in the light of a saint who loved you so much and without compromise in following you, the Suffering Servant, who opened to us the way of salvation. We come before you as parched earth that awaits the dew of thy grace; we are lost ones awaiting someone to teach your ways and for the rebellion in us to cease. As we remember the prophet, we recognize ourselves to be an impure thing, an unclean rag, wilted leaves. Now we want to live in your justice, we want to see your face of the Father, and although we recognize ourselves as poor clay, we are, however, your children, the object of your love, the work of your hands. Have mercy on us, O Redeemer, because we are tired of wandering from your ways, and we want to be saved. Eternal Word, you who are before all time, save the men of our time, proving that you are God with us. Amen.

II Thursday – A LAND

Each land has its seasons and its history. Every land bears in itself the mark of the Almighty because everything is the work of God "who forms the mountains and creates the wind, who creates the dawn and the darkness and walks on the heights of the earth ... (Am. 4:13) The earth is the mother, it is the cradle, it is the natural call to all men are called to "preserve and cultivate the land" to complete the work of creation.

It is good for the Ritian path also to be geographical and ecological to better understand the history of that land, the mentality of the people of Umbria and the importance of that culture so far removed from our own. Rita is a daughter of this Umbrian land with the unmistakable profile of its landscape called the "Galilee of Italy"; her religion was born from the "humus" of the authentically contemplative Umbrian soul, "Umbria: green and the land of saints", so it is recalled by history and folklore, so the past is lived in the beautiful traditions that are fragments of our Italian civilization.

The man of the industrial civilization, that lives in anguish and in the well-being of a technology that, along with wealth, has built an earthly dwelling poisoned by his selfishness, must imitate the wisdom of the Biblical man who lived in respect for Mother Earth.



In Rita's time, Cascia was a point of reference in the medieval life of central Italy; it was the bridge that united the South to the North, drawing cultural, social and commercial benefits from the travel routes that wound through the back of the Apennines.

The two souls of the Republic of Cascia, the religious and the socio-political, are remembered by the ruins of monasteries and watchtowers that still can be seen as silent witnesses of so much goodness and so much violence. In uninhabited valleys and on the sunny hills, amid the green vegetation, there crop up the remains of monasteries that were small Horebs, "burning bushes", where men consumed their days in the ascetic exercise days of the folly and wisdom of the cross. But the territory of Cascia is also populated by defensive walls and towers with openings where the sentries guarded enemy movements and suspicious persons.

Now the mule tracks have disappeared, they have been transformed into modern and fast routes for pilgrims; the towers are poor memories; Cascia has no defensive walls, but has become "a city set on a hill", a small crossroads of the spirit, a lamp that cannot be hidden.

Recalling the time of Rita, we do not intend to make a purely tourist excursion, and neither do we want to set up a committee with the right to judge history; we want to be pilgrims, through the eyes of faith, we want to admire the skilful hand of God, that gently, but strongly, drives the events of history.

Rita lived in that world as a spiritual daughter of those hermitages, but was also a victim of the violence of those towers; she lived as a cone of light to implement the program of Christian life described by St. Paul: "... that you may be blameless and innocent children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as stars in the world". (Phil. 2:14-15).

In that world mixed with good and evil we see "the vineyard of the Lord" where great souls scattered the good seed of the word of God.

Speaking of Umbria everyone thinks of the land of Francis and Benedict as Franciscan and Benedictine land; with this Ritian path we wish to recall that a small piece of this mystical land of Umbria is also Augustinian.

PRAYER

In the great temple of creation you, O Lord, have placed man to till it to preserve the beauty of the world, so that the land would be the home and the homeland of every man. Instead, the sources of all life are being poisoned and the land is becoming a desert.

Grant, O Lord, that the man of our civilization may understand that to save humanity he must save the universe, giving up his selfishness and accept the values superior to all wealth; that it is possible to enjoy the fragrance and beauty of the flower without severing it, because it is everyone's heritage.

Give us, O Lord, the heart of Rita, the heart of the eternal child, with whom she admired the greatness of the creatures in the enchanting majesty of its mountains; she praised your name in the mystical silence of the cliffs by saluting, in prayer, the sunrises and sunsets of her Umbria.

Grant, Lord, that man, a "small particle of creation", may praise you in a world made beautiful and good again as the one that came out of the power and wisdom of your hands at the beginning of time. Amen.

III Thursday – AN UMBRIAN VILLAGE

Our pilgrimage begins in the small village of Roccaporena where the saint was born in 1381. The village is five kilometres from Cascia and is easily accessible by a good road that winds along the rugged and unspoiled valley, or rather gorge, of the river Corno.

Like the swallows, attracted and guided by the sun and stars by an ancestral instinct, return to their old nest, so we come to the land of Rita as attracted by the memory and history of our saint.

Roccaporena is like a land from a fairy tale, it is a geographical dot lost in the hills shaped by millennia, in the folds of a history forged by the violence of earthquakes, and that the centuries have erected as a protection and defence of the defenceless people.

A handful of houses with no history; it is not a landscape, but a hiding place; more than a village it is a nativity set. Even time seems to stand still in a date unspecified by the centuries as a being closed within the limits of an alien space.

Roccaporena does not know the transparency of the far-off horizon in boundless space; its inhabitants greet only part of the sunrises and sunsets because the high crown of the hills allows the limited view of a patch of sky that can be seen by raising one's head: the sun of Roccaporena is that of midday. Why linger (some may wonder) in the geographical description of the village of Rita? It is not for a purely ecological reason. Each land has its own ... soul, its heart, its blood made up of wind, sun, storms, lightning, the cold, herbs and flowers In this metaphysical landscape of sky and recollection Rita was struck by the wind of the Spirit; in this world of silence she began the undoing of her fallenness to live in union with God; in this desert blooming with seasons she lived her way to be "nothing", giving herself to belong to everyone.

As for us, so for Rita, the place of her birth was not by choice, it was not a gift to be earned, it was not even a "quirk of God"; it was the choice of God, who mysteriously implements his plan of salvation. The "geographical theology" of Roccaporena bore the richness of "concealment" which is the negation of all human emphasis of the person, it is indeed the providential highlighting of the smallness of the creatures that God chooses for great works. This world, so spiritual, suggests to us, however, a first and crucial caveat: Rita was not an angelic woman who lived walking on the clouds or among the stars of narcissistic fantasy. Not at all! ...

The small world of Roccaporena that was so religious bore, however, in itself the crisis of Christian identity; even in this small field there grew together wheat and tares. The society of Rita was dominated by the law of the jungle; the cry of the weak, the groaning of the poor and of the many victims of violence were lost in tears and in helpless resignation.

In our reflection we combine the past with the present in a close range to compare two worlds so distant and different: the medieval world and our technological time, post-industrial, secularised and opulent where man is the slave of things, and unable to appreciate the values of his dignity. Man needs the mystery of the faith and grace so that, in a radical genesis, he can understand the limits of his humanity.

Our saint lived in her world with the eyes of faith; she was not impatient to eradicate the weeds immediately, she did not ask the Lord for the punishment of the wicked; as a true Christian she

realized that God's patience is not weakness, nor disinterest of evil, but is the mysterious logic of the heart of the Father who awaits the return of his son. The itinerary in the historical environment should serve for us not to distort her spirituality for our use and consumption, and must avoid the sentimental devotion that feeds on too many leaves and too few fruits.

PRAYER

Almighty and eternal God, answer the prayers of your Church that in the morning, at noon and in the evening celebrates your praises; scatter from our hearts the darkness of evil so that we may proceed safely towards Christ, the true light that never sets; gladdens our hearts with the wonders of creation; make him arise in our spirits as the sun of justice and truth. You, Lord, in your strength you have shown the perennial order of the world, you have created the earth and remain faithful for all generations. You are just in your judgments, admirable in strength, incomprehensible in splendour, wise in creation and provident in its preservation, good and faithful to those who trust in you, gracious and merciful God. You, Lord, allow yourself to be found by those who seek you with a sincere heart; nourish within us the desire for your face and direct our steps towards you to enjoy your peace in the land that you have given us as a home to sanctify and to leave as a legacy to others, so that we may imitate your servant Rita who lived in her homeland as a pilgrim and stranger with a heart set on the promised land that is the day that knows no sunset.

Lord, you have created us for truth, love and beauty, the imprint of your wisdom, draw us to you, o highest good, with the inner richness of the beauty of the virtues that we may contemplate the immensity and splendour of creation as a ladder to rise to you, Beauty of all beauties. Amen.

IV Thursday – A HOME

The village of Roccaporena of the fifteenth century. A desert of silence that greeted the day with the crowing of the cock. Dusty streets in summer, muddy in winter. A small cluster of houses grouped around the church of St. Montanus: the house of God and men, home of the living and the dead. House of prayer and a cemetery, doubly sacred.

A house like others with its crucifix, with the fire almost always burning, with its oil lamp that goes out late in the evening. This is the home of Antonio Lotti and Amata Ferri, spouses joined in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health. The light stays on and the fireplace with its fire were the companions during the long winter evenings, animated by prayer and reading the Bible. A model family of that time, also valid for today because it is based on the rock of human and Christian principles that never go out. "The couple and the family constitute the first space for the social commitment of the lay faithful. It is a commitment that can only be fulfilled adequately with the conviction of the unique and irreplaceable value of the family for the development of society and the Church itself." (Christifideles laici n. 40)

The couple spent the days and seasons in solitude because they were childless. Afflicted, but resigned to the will of God who guides the events not only of the world but also of individual creatures. Amata lived in the shadow of her husband, a faithful companion in the activity of a Christian and a citizen. The little we know about them does not allow us to compose a complete picture of the couple. They were the family tree from which came the fruit of a good daughter famous worldwide for her holiness. From tradition we know that the father was a "peacemaker", a civic and Christian mission, which today we call a "volunteer worker."

The turbulent world of the Republic of Cascia was reflected even in the small world of Roccaporena, and the work of peacemakers (without financial remuneration) wanted to be a witness and service in favour of the weak against the violence of revenge and retaliation, also called "rides" ("cavalcate"). Like today, society cannot meet the needs of citizens, despite the modern and efficient machinery (at least apparently); much more was the society of that time in need of some citizens who enjoyed the confidence of the people and lent themselves as intermediaries with the noble intention of bringing peace. Prehistoric man was afraid of nature when it unleashed the forces of earthquakes and hurricanes that sowed destruction and death; the man of all times has always been more afraid of man than of beasts and forces of nature.

The man of today, in spite of civilization, is still afraid of man; in this full-blown civilization there has not been born the "new man" of the gospel. At least so far The father of Rita, a man of great faith, would be today a "charismatic" person, a prophetic witness of the Church, the Christian of Vatican Council II, the missionary of two thousand who wants to avoid the divorce between God and man.

Speaking of the work of the "peacemaker", Antonio Lotti is how to describe, at least in part, the vocation and mission of the lay faithful according to the Constitution *Lumen Gentium*: "the faithful, who, having been incorporated into Christ through baptism and made the people of God and, in their own way, made sharers in the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ, for their part fulfil in the Church and world, the mission of the whole Christian people "; (LG 31: EVI/362).

The different personality of Amata consisted in not doing anything out of the ordinary and extraordinary because she felt herself a simple and vulnerable creature.

The woman of the Middle Ages, who lived in the manner of life of the time, far from any publicity, showed however the courage, firmness and elegance born of the principles that govern all human and religious coexistence.

In every time woman is the companion of man, she is the interpreter and protagonist; today instead she is the creature most exposed to the most humiliating and degrading forms of "exploitation" that make her a slave to advertising, to the pornography of squalid interests that debase her dignity.

Rita's parents are indispensable components to understanding the big picture of the history of our saint. Speaking of the Mancini - Lotti family of Roccaporena is how to describe the inner landscape of creatures that have left the imprints of their faith in the sand of history ...

PRAYER

We know, Lord, that at your birth "the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light" (Is. 9:1). We want to ask you that the light of truth dispel the darkness of ignorance and lies that surround our existence, annulling the boundaries of violence and selfishness. As in the days of our saint, we too, O Lord, bear too many signs of weakness and fragility of not offering ideals consistent with the dignity of man and his being a Christian, we do not provide models able to arouse enthusiasm and ideal tensions.

Grant, Lord, that in every family there may flourish the green olive bough of Christian hope, which is faith, dialogue, trust and respect between spouses, that the priceless gift of the sacrament of marriage recall that if the Lord does not build the house, in vain do its builders labour, if the Lord of life does not watch over the house, in vain do its guardians keep vigil; may each family, Lord,

be the theological and charming icon of the wedding song that blossomed from the still pure lips of the first man to the first woman in the paradise of Eden before evil darkened the serenity and beauty of love and life.

Grant, Lord, that man (that great sick creature of all time) may live the intimacy of his home as a story and prophecy of faith and hope that make easy what is difficult, that every family be a joyful news of a love "saved and saving", so that your faith in man be never overshadowed by the hardness of heart that threatens the project of life.

Grant, O Lord, that every man's home, the pilgrim nomad tent in the desert of life, may not be soon rolled up, but come to greet the sun that knows no night. Amen.

V Thursday – A CRADLE

The Lotti family is celebrating the birth of a child which was given the name of Margherita, whose diminutive is RITA. The year was 1381; we know neither the day nor the month. The loneliness of the house is overcome, old age will have a comfort; from the trunk of the old tree has bloomed the spring, a flower has budded. That child will not be a meteorite that quickly cuts through the sky of life without a trace; she will have her own history, to accomplish her mission, walk along the roads traced by the finger of the invisible God.

The lack of specification of the day and month of birth of the child Rita displeases, more than the historians, those who have so much faith in consulting horoscopes, interrogating the stars, predicting the future by astrological sign, or in using cards or various forms of magic.

Amata and Antonio would have expressed their feelings of joy and gratitude to the Lord according to the joy of a mother, Elizabeth, who obtained her son John in her old age, the son of a miracle that the mother consecrated to the Lord. (Lk 1:57-80)

At the beginning of life the Church offers us the privilege to become adopted sons of God through the sacrament of baptism; for the little Rita the ceremony was held in the church of St. John the Baptist, attached to the convent of St. Augustine, which was already built before the battlements themselves and was officiated by the canons of St. Augustine regular where there was the baptismal font. In the large nest of the world all the baptized feel the presence of the spirit "as an eagle that stirs the nest, that flutters over its young, spreading her wings, carrying them and bearing them on her feathers." (Deut. 32:11) Much more than a zodiac sign!

The commitment of baptism in the Christian life involves not just taking part in a religious movement, it is not lending a generic service, but it is the Christian's immersion in the life of Christ who died and rose again; it means to "put on Christ" in order to be able to say with St. Paul: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." (Gal. 2:21)

It is human and nice to stop and contemplate the joy of the parents of Rita; like the villagers of Roccaporena we also want to join in their happiness for the great gift given to them by the Lord. Every mother expresses her debt of gratitude to the Lord, and I do not think I'm far from reality if we link the joy of mother Amata to the song of praise of a mother mentioned in the first book of Kings chapter 2. Anna who after tears and prayers had a son Samuel whom she consecrated to the Lord in the temple of Shiloh. It is the song of all mothers who express their faith in the Lord who saves those who trust in him, because no one is strong and holy like him, because he watches over all creation, because he puts to death and gives life, because he elevates the humble

and humbles the proud, because he helps the poor; it is he who watches over the steps of every man.

Faith tells us that every child born is not only a new life blooming, but a unique and unrepeatable being. At each birth the Lord, lover of life, renews his confidence in man, in every cry it is the mystery of life that is renewed in the angelic smile of the face of the innocent, it is a ray of goodness that means to renew the beauty of the world.

In this regard, we should remember what John Paul II wrote: "The Church has never yielded in the face of all the violations that the right to life, proper to every human being, has received and continues to receive, both from individuals and from the authorities themselves. The holder of such a right is the human being at every stage of development, from conception to natural death; and in every condition, whether healthy or sick, whole or handicapped, rich or poor. The Vatican Council II openly proclaims: Whatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia and voluntary suicide; whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, or tortures inflicted on body or mind, attempts to coerce the spirit; whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and young people ... (Christifideles laici n. 38). A solemn warning that we must consider in our "culture of death".

PRAYER

O Lord, our prayer recalls the cry of a woman, Rachel, ancestor of thy people, described by the prophet Jeremiah emerging from the tomb of Ramah and crying over the Israelites led into exile, while St. Matthew (2:17-18) interprets her as weeping for the slaughter of the innocents at your birth.

The logic of your incarnation (man among men) was at once a tragedy; you were forced to flee from the deadly hands of men, but your life was saved because there was watching over you, the hand of the Almighty. Today we do not hear your voice, O God of life: "Take the child and flee", today there are many mothers who deliver their children to the many Herods of our culture of death.

Why, Lord, does the man of our time feel such a commendable sensitivity to the life and preservation of many species of animals and does not feel the same feeling for so many helpless children? Why today does man give himself the right to possess the key to life and death, desecrating the consciousness of many mothers and transforming clinics and hospitals into so many cemeteries that cry for vengeance before God? We pray, Lord, that our inhuman world be illuminated by the light of your birth, that every child that comes to light be a "good news" for a better world, so that this land of ours give us the wonder of a huge garden where children are the best flowers of our existence and the hope of the world.

Blessed are you, Lord for the life that flourished in the small house of Roccaporena because the girl Rita was not only the joy of her parents, but also joy to all those who, grateful and thankful over the centuries, live in her memory and protection. Amen.

VI Thursday – THE YOUNG GIRL

The life of a small medieval village life was a lively one; at that time, too, the young people had their festive, carefree and bon vivant lives with tournaments of ladies and gentlemen, with parties in the style and the possibilities of the time. We see Rita in the world of her time and her village, follow the steps of her life as a child and young girl. At that time children were really, in the

culture of the time, small satellites spinning around the social system of the family. Sunday Mass was also the meeting of the small community; after the Eucharistic liturgy the world Roccaporena came alive with talk of men exchanging information and experiences; women had always something to say about the events of the week, the boys and girls enjoyed the freedom to chase each other, play and shout. The Sabbath was the oasis of rest, peace and brotherhood.

During the week, Rita, with her friends, would have climbed up the slopes of the cliffs and the surrounding hills to play and look for nests, while the mothers called their daughters. Above all, we see Rita with her mother gathering in prayer awaiting the return of her father, a committed peacemaker in dealing with violent people who were little inclined to forgiveness and understanding.

Of course, Rita was a contemplative since her youth, she learned to live in that broken world, she knew how to imprint her ordinary actions with her identity as a Christian; but the call to recollection did not impede her from being and living a normal life with her companions: joking, playing and acting up like all the children of the world. What we should avoid is to think of the saints as a living miracle, creating in us not only wonder, but even despondency and despair when considering ourselves so far from holiness. So we see the young Rita with a view that is simple, natural and real; let us not consider the holy people as strange, moody and insensitive to the joys and sorrows of life: they are not brainwashed people.

In Rita's time there was no obligation to go to school, nor were the topics of psychology and sexuality, feminism and democracy addressed; the society had other problems. The family was the school that formed the sensitivity, religiosity, education and culture of the children.

So young Rita reflects that society, and she is especially the mirror of her family, her father and mother were her teachers.

Rita's youth and that of today are two distant planets, two worlds that are too different in culture, life, psychology and religion: two civilizations light years away. Psychologists speak of a "generational divide" according to which the children of today soon leave the family because parents are too busy in business and societal problems; they give money and many gifts, but allow little time to listen to them and therefore give little affection. The youth crisis today is lived differently in human and Christian values: the precepts related to social issues are observed (against terrorism, injustice, theft, pollution, drugs and violence); while there is a decline in the precepts regarding divorce, abortion, cohabitation, homosexuality and premarital experiences. Young people today live a drama full of contradictions: they seem to live a romance with a happy ending, which instead leads to the tragedy of so many mysterious suicides. The anguish, frustration, sadness, and restlessness of the heart are masking a false happiness, they are stages on a journey into the unknown, a pilgrimage of unhappy pilgrims doomed to chase the vain utopia of a "happiness transplant" into a diseased heart, which is ill from the "silence of God". Strange indeed is our society: rich and opulent enough to offer everything, while many young people run away from their families and let themselves die from not being loved.

After so bleak an outlook, we turn our gaze elsewhere: do we not see budding the lives of so many gems of a wonderful spring? In contrast with many young people devoted to "Saturday night" who can be found in nightclubs, there is a large number of young people who, even on a Saturday night, gather in monasteries, convents, houses of hospitality and retreats to read the Bible, meditate on God's word, pray, sing and share different experiences; all this for a greater

psychological maturity, to respond to the responsibilities of life, showing that discipline and sacrifice have their own "flavour" when life is seen as communion and service to others.

After many reflections there still one question: why the crisis of youth? One of the many responses, perhaps, the most real, could be this: because society and the family are in crisis. When a tree, in the spring, has few buds and little fruit it is a sign that it is sick.

PRAYER

Also our society, O Lord, has its nomads walking the roads of the world like pilgrims out of nowhere because they are without ideals. You know, O Lord: these nomads are many young people who value the past as worthless dust, who do not think of the future because, immersed in everyday life, they live day to day according to their program of life to have everything at once. They have no future.

O Lord, we pray you: make these young people understand that in life there are no shortcuts, by jumping over ideals that have always guaranteed the social life of man; that there is no utopian, disillusioned world of only rights and no duties; that life is not a single season; that the existence of each is not a gamble, but a responsibility and a radical choice.

Grant, O Lord, that the life of the young Rita be a reminder, an example and a lesson to remember the timeless principles of the gospel; that her example help them to live those ideals which are yeast capable of fermenting the existence of the young people of every age. The life of young Rita is not, O Lord, the report card of good behaviour for a good, Christian edification, but is a path marked out for everyone, especially young people, who want to live life as mission of service and fellowship, thus avoiding the many contradictions of our culture.

In the end, we ask you, O Lord, that young people open a new horizon where subjects are responsible for their choices and not passive spectators of a crisis, which often manifests itself as the deprivation of cultural and critical dynamism because it is an empty and poor performance in the public square. Amen.

VII Thursday – THE WIFE

Every creature runs, in life, toward a goal. Life, however, is not a long straight path; it has many curves, many corners that prevent us from seeing the continuation of the path. One's personal vocation is not realized with the response of a referendum, the secret of the ballot is unknown: a vocation is a personal choice that is accomplished as the will of God, after having also sought the advice of others. The decision is personal.

The historical figure of St. Rita the wife is passed through the filter of the process of canonization that has passed on to us the human wealth of this young woman who is not a "shipwreck" of time and history, as a certain modern psychology would like to suggest.

The life of a wife is immersed in an atmosphere of emotions, feelings, wonders, anxieties and subtle differences that are fascinating and mysterious entanglements.

In this Thursday and in future ones we contemplate the "Trilogy of Saint Rita": Rita the wife, mother and widow. The period of Rita's youth ended at the age of 13-14 years, when she was betrothed by her parents to her fellow villager Paolo di Ferdinando Mancini. History reminds us that, in matrimonial matters, parents could intervene in the choice of the groom according to certain statutory rules. The real key to the interpretation of Rita the bride is found in the legitimate concern of the old parents, unsure of to whom to leave their young daughter. Given her age, she

should have been entrusted to guardians, people whose honesty is not always guaranteed. Little Rita was a treasure too precious to entrust to people who did not offer sufficient guarantees: personal and family interests and the precariousness of social situations made men reeds in the wind. The safe bet was marriage; her parents preferred the groom to the guardian. The acceptance of the will of the parents was "prophetic obedience": Rita would be a spouse and a nun. But not right away, as she wished. The nobility of her soul and the great spirit of sacrifice (lose in order to have) made her an even greater woman of heroic faith that purifies and refines because she gives up her will. With her marriage Rita gave a witness of love to her elderly parents and made more valuable her loyalty to Christ.

The parents of the saint have no need of "rehabilitation" as some historians would have it. Their choice was not a "sin" against the daughter, but a "virtue" in defines of the weak. The fault, if anything, is that of her times.

Who was Paolo di Ferdinando Mancini? He certainly was not a thief, a murderer, or a drunk as he is presented in a certain tradition; his defect, that I would call "historical", was violence; he was intractable as described by the historian Cavallucci: "A very fierce man." In this concise identikit lies also perhaps the secret of his bloody end.

The young bride with her renunciation of the monastic ideal became a loving, conciliatory, understanding wife for the fifteen years of her married life. History tells us that Paolo, from a lion, became a lamb; the goodness of his spouse was contagious even for the rude and unscrupulous man. Rita became the happy bride when her husband became a good Christian and her joy was immense at the birth of their two sons Giangiacomo and Paolo Maria.

Then came the hour of grief, the night of the tragedy. Where, when and why the husband of Rita was killed, are unanswered questions. There are various possible reasons: personal vendettas, old grudges, conflicts between Guelphs and Ghibellines, struggles between the bourgeoisie and the people. It was the year 1412-1413. According to the logic of the time, Paolo's killing became the chronicle of the day and the spiral of hatred spread like wildfire. Rita Lotti, Mancini's widow, made strongly heard the voice of Christian forgiveness. The gesture of Rita is the heritage of the evangelical violence that has conquered history for centuries and one finds in the widow of Roccapiorena a personality worthy of the utmost consideration and admiration. But still that's not all. The inner world of Rita wife and widow with humanly "impossible" gestures is like a deep, open sky that we still need to explore. Even the human soul, like the stars, has its light years.

What is the message of Rita the wife for today's spouses? The life of a married woman now requires efficiency, professionalism and social commitment because it is aimed towards success and awards as a token of achievement. Rightly, the woman has to cultivate public relations; yet society needs both women managers and housewives. In this regard, let us listen to John Paul II regarding the family: "The couple and the family constitute the first space for the social commitment of the lay faithful. It is a commitment that can only be fulfilled adequately with the cultivation of the unique and irreplaceable value of the family for the development of society and the Church itself." (Christifideles laici n. 40)

PRAYER

In the fullness of time you, O Lord, have fulfilled your promise to save man with the mystery of the Incarnation of your Son, Jesus: He became man living in the intimacy of the family of Nazareth with his mother Mary and foster father Joseph.

Your family, Lord, recalls the religious value that puts God first in obedience to thy law; because in it we learn the value of love sublime, as a school that values work according to the dignity of man, honestly procuring their daily bread; because in the family-school of Nazareth we learn the difficult art of education in which the future of humanity is at stake.

We know, Lord, that times have changed, that society is different, that the old values are despised and new ones proposed; we also know that the new values, such as gain, success and wealth, not only do not bring certainty, but multiply the doubts, anxieties and infinite loneliness of man, who has lost his way, because he has forgotten the virtues of loyalty, honesty, justice of the faith and goodness, the prerequisites for a safe and happy life.

The small and poor house of Roccaporena recalls your home in Nazareth because it was the "domestic church" where Rita always had the Lord as her beloved guest and where she developed her vocation.

Grant, O Lord, that each family may be a land to cultivate, a seed that must sprout, a plant that produces fruits; that every man have a home where to lay his head and where you, O Lord, every day, can work the miracle of changing the water of poor humanity into the wine of joy, prosperity and peace. Amen.

VIII Thursday – THE MOTHER

The last desperate cry of Paolo was not engraved on cold rocks, but as a wrenching message was carried by the wind to the heart of the spouse and the children. The killing of the spouse and the father was not a wound that could be healed; it was an indelible stigmata.

The small world of Roccaporena with its passions creates the desert of hearts; it is the small planet where the human soul is earth scorched by hatred, it is a sky without stars. Almost every family has its widow and its orphan. Rita's marriage lasted 17-18 years. At age 35 she found herself widowed and alone to fight the decisive battle of her life: forgiving the killer and the reconciliation of the families. The Christian gesture was rejected by her sons and relatives: for them the honour of the house was worth much more than Christian forgiveness.

The case of the Mancini family became the topic of the day, reviving grudges and dividing souls. Once more, a reflection is useful to understand the calvary of mother Rita. If she rejected the Christian gesture, what would be the future of her children? Biographers report that her mother prayed for the death of her children before they would stain themselves with the blood of revenge. The Cascian law condemned to a death sentence even 15 year olds who would have killed or even damaged the property of the murderer or the alleged murderer. Thus their future was marked: either exile or beheading in the public square. The "Augustinian anthology" recalls a particularly chilling detail: the father's murderers "had conceived the satanic plan to eradicate the name of Mancini, decreeing death even for the children." History reminds us, in a form gaunt and mysterious, that the children died very young, perhaps of plague. Rita accompanied another two coffins to the church of St. Montanus. And her solitude was complete.

The dramatic historical events of the mother of Roccaporena were, as it were, softened by the popular tradition of the legend that Rita, close to death in her monastery cell, asked for a rose from her garden of Roccaporena in midwinter. The rose bloomed in her garden not with the heat of the sun, but in the heat of faith and love of the heroic mother who had asked for the miracle of the rose as a sign of forgiveness for her children.

The significant invocation addressed to St. Rita as the "saint of the impossible" must be understood in the sense that it is difficult or "impossible" to find a mother able to sacrifice even her children to avoid sin. Too obvious is the contrast between the mentality of the gospel (He who loves father or mother, son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; Matt. 10:37), and the opposite, materialistic mentality of our civilization, ready to sacrifice the spiritual, or betray God for the worship of the idols of our prosperity. In this respect, today there is no more sin because everything is permitted; it has lost the sense of responsibility of moral evil.

Sociologists and psychologists speak of "youth against"; against society, against the authorities, against the family, against the state; they speak of "children at risk" who swell the army of professional criminals, of organized crime, the future protagonists of crime news. In the field of youth there is a terrible eclipse of conscience, a moral and cultural deformation, an anaesthesia of reason and conscience by which man tries to evade responsibility for his actions.

Allowing for exceptions, many young people do not feel the moral problem, they do not see sin; they have a vague idea of self-redemption without recourse to God, they exclude the conversion of the heart, which consists in listening to the word of God, which alone can enlighten the conscience regarding good and evil. Too many false reasons are put forward to digging an increasingly unbridgeable abyss between the conception of moral evil and the materialistic reality of modern culture. The hierarchy of values is too often ignored with the sad consequence that life seems to have lost its dignity and its value, so much so that some kill just for money. And this is our civilization. Mamma Rita wants to remind young people that they are capable of great acts of heroism, of great sacrifice and of living great ideals; she wants to recall that Christian morality is not a cage from which we must free ourselves, ultimately she wants to recommend them to be authentic and true inside and out. In this regard it is good to draw our attention to what John Paul II writes: "It is necessary a vast, deep and systematic work, supported not only by culture but also by economic and legislative instruments, which will safeguard the family in its job of being the primary place of 'humanization' for the person and society." (Christifideles laici n. 40).

PRAYER Lord, our prayer is born today from hearts full of sadness and despair because everyday life is becoming a desert poor in mothers. We pray for these creatures unique and indispensable for the life of the world; they are the real creatures that know how to love because they know suffering, and, in silence, they live their tragedies. O Lord, we want to remember when you, a pilgrim on earth, comforted so many mothers with your almighty goodness; grant, also through the intercession of Rita, that all the mothers may fulfil, with courage and perseverance, their mission in life and death, happiness and tragedy; that they may bring hope to a desperate world. We live, O Lord, in an unprecedented crisis; too many guides propose for us an absurd universe where everything ends in nothingness. The crisis of the family has caused the disappearance of respect, modesty, just measure and simplicity. In this darkness of values one lives without a reason to live. How many mothers, o St. Rita, pass every day in front of your venerable body; see that their prayers are often drenched in tears. We are sure, Lord, that the world will see a new dawn when there are no more mothers who have defiled the sacred temple of the person, the source of life that trample their dignity in the depths of their natural identity. Grant, O Lord, to the human family many mothers, holy mothers like Rita of Cascia. Amen.

Last part of the trilogy of Saint Rita: the widow of peace. With the untimely death of children (1414-15) peace between the families seemed to be facilitated. Instead the Mancini widow had become "the topic of the day"; avoided by the villagers and hated by her relatives for her Christian way of life, judged a fanatic and irresponsible for the forgiveness granted to her husband's killer and for that obstinacy to urge her children to avoid revenge. The widow Rita was like a boat in a storm and abandoned to her fate. Her integral and radical faith in the gospel was the antithesis of the mentality of this world always ready to condemn the innocent and defenceless. The "religious scandal" of Rita offended the "dignity" of the relatives humiliated in their family pride and who demanded revenge. The widow spent hours working for her livelihood, and especially lived in prayer recalling her loved ones, taking refuge in the church of St. Montanus, or retreating into the silence and solitude of the cliffs. It is also true that Rita would spend her free time in the church of St. Augustine of Cascia to ask for advice and comfort from the Augustinian fathers: to have a direction for her future so full of worries and uncertainties; another oasis of spiritual rest was the monastery of St. Mary Magdalene to commend herself to the prayers of the Augustinian nuns.

The tragedy of Rita the widow was complete; the hostility of the small world of Roccaporena that judged her "different" because of her conviction and consistency in living the gospel, and the despol of the callous people, closed to God's law which commands forgiveness to enemies and forbids revenge.

With simple and consistent adherence to the teaching of Christ, Rita tried to understand not to condemn the erring, not to raise barriers, but to bring to all the message of peace and truth. The faith of the housewife of Roccaporena was not a sling throwing rocks to break the often opaque "glass" of many consciences, it was rather a quiet and warm ray of light that illuminates and does not offend.

The world of Rita is also our world. The saint lived a real passion in body and spirit; she could say with St. Paul that she was a "spectacle to the world, to angels and to men". Like Job the Mancini widow learned the art of suffering, and, through the pain, understood the God of promise and consolation.

Rita has a special place in Cascian history for being a peacemaker in this world of so much violence and so much injustice. Free from all family ties upon the death of all her loved ones, she decided to enter the Augustinian monastery of St. Mary Magdalene; but she found a legal difficulty in the norm 1401 of the laws of Cascia, with which set the conditions that had to be observed by Cascians to join a monastery. One of the provisions ordered that a childless widow could not become a nun without the consent of her relatives. Taking into account the social and religious conditions of the time it is permissible to hypothesize, without much risk of error, that her relatives would have granted their consent provided that the widow participate in the vendetta to save the honour of her relatives. So Rita found herself at a decisive crossroads: either join the family and fail in the Christian law of forgiveness that she had always sustained, or give up forever the thought of joining a monastery. In the radical consistency to the gospel she found a third way, making possible what seemed impossible: peace between the feuding families.

Following the example of her father the peacemaker, she faced the situation not according to strategic reasons suggested by human motives, she did not seek compromises with political spaces, she did not want a purely superficial coexistence, she did not promote "holy wars", she did not fight in the shade of some partisan banner, she did not entrust the dispute to the "judgment of God" with a duel or the passage of the contenders through fire or water according to the barbaric



logic of the Middle Ages (ordeals), according to which the victory of the stronger party was considered the triumph of right: she called for peace in the name of God and the brotherhood of man.

The word of forgiveness uttered by Christ on the cross was repeated in the mountains of Cascia from the lips of a housewife who firmly believed in the utopia of love as a way of victory in people's lives and as the firm rock on which to build the world's history.

The story does not tell us how peace was achieved; but we can say that it was a much sought after and painfully-obtained peace, through humiliation and renunciation. She did not get discouraged in front of the hardness of hearts; she cried out to the Lord in her faith and was answered. If you have faith like a mustard seed, you could move even a mountain.

It was a sight when in the church of St. Montanus, the miracle of reconciliation occurred in the presence of a people become a prophetic church in brotherhood and communion. The bells rang in the alleluia of the renewed Easter of the Christian exodus: a passage from hatred to forgiveness, from revenge to peace. Siena had Catherine, the little republic of Cascia had Rita as a woman of peace. It was the year 1416.

The mission of Rita was a prophetic mission because it awakened the conscience of the community of Roccaporena, because she was able to sacrifice her social status and to deal with the adverse judgment of men to realize that peace which is the fruit of justice for all men, and that is also the supreme good of the whole person. In this evangelical vision we contemplate Rita of Cascia as a widow of peace.

PRAYER

O Lord, your servant Rita, because she is a woman of the Beatitudes was a worker of that peace which is messianic, a good news, love, light, a sign of hope and universal brotherhood. We ask that your peace, like a bright comet, come back to illuminate the path of our society, that the disciples in 2000, shaking off the dust of hate, walk through the streets of the world, bringing peace to every corner of the earth.

"God of our fathers, great and merciful, Lord of peace and life, Father of all. You create prophets of peace and not of affliction, you condemn wars and bring down the pride of the violent.

You sent your Son Jesus to proclaim the peace that is not that of the world, to bring together people of every race and every lineage into a single family. Listen to the unanimous cry of men of good will, the heartfelt prayers of all mankind: no more war, an adventure with no return, no more war, a spiral of death and violence, a threat to your creatures in heaven, on earth and at sea.

In union with Mary, the Mother of Jesus, once more we beseech thee: speak to the hearts of those responsible for the fate of the people, stop the logic of retaliation and revenge, suggest new solutions with your Spirit, honourable and generous gestures, spaces for dialogue and of the most fruitful patient waiting for the hastened end of war. Grant to our time days of peace. Never again war. Amen." (Prayer composed by Pope John Paul II).

X Thursday – THE AUGUSTINIAN NUN

In the middle of the night despair can arise, but with the morning light hope also blooms. The proverb says that the storm and the hurricane bend the plant, but do not break it: Rita is this plant with solid roots and sturdy trunk.

The point of reference of the Mancini widow is now the Augustinian monastery of St. Mary Magdalene. Rita entered the monastery at the age of 37 years. Having overcome the difficulties with the peace obtained against all hope, her entrance into the monastery was exalted by the popular tradition according to which the three patron saints, John the Baptist, St. Augustine and St. Nicholas of Tolentino miraculously opened the doors, and the nuns found Rita in the choir, where they went to pray early in the morning. The episode of the tradition is explained in the sense that the three saints helped Rita become a nun not by materially opening the doors, but by helping her to overcome difficulties, and not to be discouraged and to touch rebellious hearts, bending them to peace, as the story reminds us. There now beings the second time in the life of Rita; the laywoman of Roccaporena becomes the Augustinian religious. Having reconstituted the souls with peace, we can be sure that even her relatives and fellow villagers joined in the joy of Rita, accompanying her in the short exodus of five kilometres from Roccaporena to Cascia. The memories of the young girl, the bride, the mother and the widow mingled with tears, saying goodbye to the village and the humble cottage that had been her world for 37 years. Thus Rita, too, leaves her land to answer the call of God.

We find the life of Rita the nun described in a brief and meaningful elegy of the notary and biographer: "Rita persevered for forty years in serving God with love." 0

The housewife of Roccaporena constantly striving to live the "hierarchy of values", now had chosen the "better part which shall not be taken away from her" (Lk. 10:42).

Rita gives herself to God as one who puts herself at his service and makes a commitment that henceforth identifies her. The initiative of God comes into her life, her being human and female is overturned, she has responded to his call without knowing what would happen. Thus God exercises his right, thus he enters into the life of each of us. The faith in God was not an easy virtue, but the mystery of death and resurrection to be lived in the shadows and in the folly of the cross that God reveals to a few generous creatures.

The life of the monastery, while separated from the dangers of the world, requires no less courage than that experienced in the life of a layperson. Even in the monastery one can have the dual experience of Jacob, the ladder full of angels descending and ascending from earth to heaven, or one can experience the struggle between the creature and God, that fight that is purification, prayer and gift that overcomes human fragility, loneliness and the "silence of God".

The life of every man is a journey in stages, a pilgrimage of faith where one has to take the risk of relying blindly on the word of God as Abraham, and to be indifferent to all that is relative to be available to the Absolute.

Our world needs these creatures that substitute for the family of flesh and blood the family of the spirit, of those who really do the will of God and "let the dead bury the dead" to achieve a "spiritual renewal", to implement the gospel "without adjusting it", which is a Christian revolution, the only one capable of creating man in the measure of God and a society worthy of man.

Monasteries are so many Horebs, the holy mountain where the burning bush of sacrifice and prayer are a sign of God's presence in our cynical and indifferent society.

What John Paul II writes on the consecrated life is a response to those who ask: What do the nuns do in the monastery? "We must say that even today we need the witness of consecrated life, so

that man may never forget that his true dimension is the eternal one. Man is destined to inhabit new heavens and a new earth (2 Pt. 3:13), and proclaim that true happiness is found only in the infinite love of God."

"How much poorer would our world be if the presence of those consecrated to this Love were weakened! And how much poorer would our society be if it were not induced to raise its gaze to where true joys lie. The Church, too, would be much poorer if there were not those who actually manifest with the power of the Gospel, the perennial significance of the gift of one's life for the kingdom of heaven. The Christian people needs men and women who in the offering of themselves to the Lord find the full justification of their existence and thus assume the task of being "light of the nations" and "salt of the earth", builders of hope for those who wonder about the perennial newness of the Christian ideal." (XXIX World Day of Prayer for Vocations n.3)

In her forty years in the monastery, from her small nun's cell like a window onto the world, Rita saw every bit of her earthly day, she contemplated the sunrises and sunsets of the Umbrian sky; with the heart of a sister she followed the anxieties of humanity, she took part in the endless suffering of creatures.

The journey of the pilgrims has a significant milestone in the visit to the old monastery where everything reminds one of the small Augustinian religious who having lived in the silence of the cloister as a grain of wheat in the bosom of the earth, flowers in a blessing over the centuries.

PRAYER

Lord, faith tells us that you, despite being eternal, infinite and omnipotent, have need of us creatures. We ask you, with your grace, that each of us, responding to our vocation, may be an instrument of salvation and architect of our future in full cooperation with your will.

Now you dear saint, daughter of St. Augustine can repeat with your Holy Father: " now I love only you, I follow only you, I seek only you, I am ready to follow only you, I desire to be yours. Command what you will, but heal and open my ears with which I may hear your words. Only God and the soul I want to know, nothing else. May I know myself, and may I know you, my God." (Sgs.1:4-7.21)

"O Lord my God, my only hope, listen graciously, do not allow me to desist from looking for you out of fatigue, but may I always seek your face with ardour. Give me the strength to look for you, you who allowed yourself to be found and have infused me with the hope of seeing you with ever greater knowledge.

Before you is my strength and my weakness: preserve the former, heal the latter. Before you is my knowledge and my ignorance; where you have opened me, accept me when I enter and where you have closed to me, open to me when I knock. Grant that I remember you, understand you, love you.

Make grow in me these gifts until they have completely transformed me into a new creature. (The Trinity xv, 28b)

You called me and your cry pierced my deafness. You shined and your splendour dispelled my blindness. You breathed your fragrance and I yearn for you. I have tasted you, now I hunger and thirst for more... You touched me, and burned for you, and I wish for your peace. (St. Aug. Conf. 10,27) Amen."

In the Middle Ages and in Umbria in particular, there dominated the theology of the cross. Rita was truly a daughter of her time and of the Umbrian land. Like Francis of Assisi Rita also took part in the passion of the Lord. Like the different cities of Umbria, Cascia also lived the cult of the cross in theological disputes, in the various liturgies of the processions and religious functions that called huge crowds to remember and relive the drama of Calvary. The Franciscan Bernardino of Siena, went about Italy preaching the devotion to Jesus the God-Man; in Cascia the Augustinian Simone Fidati taught the same devotion to the humanity of Christ. Rita lived the spirituality of the Augustinian and Franciscan word.

History tells us that on the evening of Friday, April 18, 1442, there preached in the parish of St. Mary of the People the Franciscan Giacomo della Marca. The church was packed with people, attracted by the holiness and the eloquence of the famous preacher; also present were Rita and her fellow nuns. The liturgy of the word was followed by the traditional procession of the dead Christ, that the city of Cascia relives every year with touching religious devotion in the traditional Umbrian folklore.

On the same evening that Good Friday 1442, Rita was united to the passion of Christ with the stigmata of the thorn from the crown of Jesus (Rita stigmatized). The wound on her forehead tormented her for 15 years. With the privilege of stigmata, Rita became the image of the "Suffering Servant". Rita, too, had her "hour", her Good Friday. Significant is the image borne on that solemn casket, where the saint, with her right hand shows the thorn to all the pilgrims who pass in front of the cell. That thorn is like the identity card of her authentic spirituality.

We all know: it is a risk to speak of suffering, especially of innocent suffering. We so easily become critical of God because we see in pain his injustice as we consider the suffering as poor and useless creatures in the history of the world.

Suffering cannot be tamed in a rational solution, but refers to a higher conception, that of the divine plan that can give meaning and a place in what surpasses human understanding.

According to Job, the journey of faith is an open path in the forest often impenetrable with evil and the absurdity of history.

Since God does not shut Job's mouth when he cursed the day of his birth, we want to be humble spokesmen of our faith after the example of the saints and of many crucified in the flesh and spirit, and we want to witness daily the faith in God that we call Father.

Faith tells us that God, even in pain, has overcome the challenge, bringing joy; Calvary is the revelation of God's power, which is different from that of men; the logic of the kingdom of God is the logic of impotence, indeed, it is the destruction of power. How to be a credible sign in our world of our faith in Christ dead and risen? Jesus responds that love, before being a commandment, is an event that is experienced, it is sharing in the suffering of one's brother, it is life offered as a gift to others: "Love one another as I have loved you." (Jn. 13:34)

St. Paul exhorts us to boast in the Lord, and St. Augustine asks: In what, Lord? He responds: "In Christ crucified: here where there is humility there is the majesty, where there is weakness there is strength, where there is death, there is life." Our society has become the great road from Jerusalem to Jericho; along the edges of this road lies humanity in need and weeping: the many suffering in body and spirit, the many crucifixes of injustices, the many oppressed by violence, the endless creatures who have no voice, the millions of poor starving ones.

Jesus and the saints were good Samaritans; and we are called to put ourselves on the same road, to carry out the same human and Christian mission, because woe to us if we find the Lord with our hearts closed to the pain of our brothers and with dry eyes out of not being in solidarity with those who suffer. The prophet Isaiah reminds us that "the Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces" (Is. 25:8). We all have a duty to this mission because the Lord needs us too.

PRAYER

O Lord, you told us so clearly why you came into this world: your earthly journey was a climb to Calvary, to the cross. You are, Lord, the truth crucified. You saved the world with your humiliation, with your annihilation, with your passion and death. Our vocation as believers is to follow you, the "Suffering Servant", to embrace the crosses of our day, confident that we can meet you on this road and follow you, contemplating your face disfigured by blood and tears. Because you were a prophet of the cross you have been uncomfortable and misunderstood even by your own disciples; you went to death in tragic loneliness, managing to implement the plan of salvation in full fidelity to the promise of the Father. Grant us, Lord, the grace not to be scandalized when pain becomes our daily bread; to be like the Cyrene and like Job to learn the great lesson of knowing how to suffer with you and for you, not to be cold-hearted, arid men and to live each day the perennial liturgy of your death. How many crucifixes redden our land with their blood, how many saddened mothers grieve for their children, how many lost and abandoned ones on the streets of the world, how many innocent people die in a shameful holocaust without greeting and enjoying the gift of life. For this we pray, O Lord, we too, like St. Rita, want to make our lives a daily Mass, the Liturgy of Good Friday like the premise of the victorious Alleluia of Holy Saturday and the expectation of your coming again in the eternal Easter of your Kingdom. Amen.

XII Thursday – SAINT RITA PILGRIM IN ROME

In relation to the stigma that the saint bore for fifteen years, we join the story of her pilgrimage to Rome. It seems that the nuns had advised against the saint from participating in the long and arduous journey due to her advanced age, 70 years; and above all due to the suffering caused her by the stigmata. The story relates the wonder of her sisters in noting that the stigmata had disappeared and in this miraculous event saw the will of the Lord to grant their fellow sister the opportunity to participate in the pilgrimage.

The journey of the saint to Rome came at an unlucky time for the church; Rita's birth had occurred shortly after the end of the "Avignon captivity" (1305-1377); The Church seemed abandoned to the passions of men with the scandal of several popes and anti-popes who for years had sown division and confusion among the people of God, a period that lasted from 1378 to 1449. It is likely that the pilgrimage of St. Rita was on the occasion of the Jubilee year 1450.

The pilgrimage of the saint to the Eternal City, confirms for us her strong commitment to the Church and her loyalty to the Pope. Rita did not have the part of the protagonist like St. Catherine of Siena, and as the story reminds us, the silent penitential journey of Augustinian community of Cascia is the "sign of the times" of a simple and consistent faith in that Church in which the Lord Jesus lives as its foundation and that defends it against the assaults of evil until the end of time.

We baptized we are children of this mother willed by Christ, we are living stones of this building, we are members of this body who has Jesus as the head. The concept of the union of Christ the head and we the limbs was expressed by St. Augustine: both they (the disciples) and we have been made known the whole Christ, but neither they nor we have seen the whole Christ. They saw the head and believed in the existence of the body; but we have seen the body and believed in the existence of the head. No one, however, lacks Christ; (Dis. 116,6).

To know better the Church, our mother, it is good to keep in mind what John Paul II wrote: "The biblical images with which the Council wished to introduce us to contemplate the mystery of the Church, shed light on the reality of the Church-communion in an inseparable unity of communion

of Christians with Christ and communion of Christians among themselves. There are the images of the sheepfold, the flock, the vine, the spiritual edifice, the holy city. Above all there is an image of the body presented by the apostle Paul, in which the doctrine flows freshly and attractively in many pages of the Council."(Christifideles laici n.19)

The liturgy of the Eucharist, in the preface, sings poetically and theologically, what is the Church: "In the fullness of time you sent your Son, guest and pilgrim among us, to redeem us from sin and death, and you have given us the Holy Spirit to make of all nations one new people whose goal is your kingdom, whose condition is the freedom of your children, whose statute is the precept of love."

In the Church life takes place in the diversity of members, in the complementarity of vocations, of the conditions of life, of ministries, of charismas and responsibilities; but all members receive and share the common vocation to holiness. All Christians in any state of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity.

Jesus said: "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the day to find workers for his vineyard." (Matt. 20:1-2)

The Gospel parable opens our eyes to the Lord's vast vineyard and the multitude of people, men and women, sent to work in his vineyard. With baptism we are all called to work. The vineyard is the whole world that must be transformed, according to the plan of God, into a fruitful field of good that is the preparation of his final coming at the end of time.

"You too go into my vineyard." The invitation of Jesus wants to shake our religious indifference, to overcome the intrusive secularism and win over practical atheism always with the allure of the eternal temptation of putting man in the place of God. (Gen.3:5). In front of a secular and atheistic humanism that virtually ignores the dignity of the human person, the Church presents Christ as the only hope of mankind, as the only Saviour who gives everyone the "Good News" of deliverance from evil.

We have the duty to accept the advice, or better, the exhortation of St. Paul, that is, to live the charisma of charity and grace, which is more than all other gifts. In the Church each one has his specific gift to live without minimizing it, because every charisma is given not for personal gain, but for the construction of the common home, which is the universal Church composed of the local churches of the dioceses and parishes.

We all know that in the modern and democratic social system there is religious freedom. But in practice how many difficulties, how much irony, how much scorn toward those who profess to be Christians! Religious intolerance, always present in our society, has created the hedonistic and agnostic culture that repeats: God yes, the Church no; a personal relationship with God, but no priests; intimate religious feeling, and no sacraments.

Let us contemplate the Church as a city set on a hill, that cannot be hidden, let us love our mother as an "expert in humanity", let us listen to our Teacher who speaks all the languages of the world, and accepts all cultures to achieve and fulfil its role to create the new man of the second creation in justice and truth, which is born of the Spirit that the risen Jesus breathed on the disciples. We baptized, witnesses of Christ to the end of the world, remember the comforting words of St.

Augustine: "Let us rejoice and give thanks that we have become not only Christians, but Christ. Marvel and rejoice: We have become Christ." (In Ioan. Ev. Tract.21)

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, we want to proclaim your name: You are Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God. You have revealed God, You are the first-born of all creation; You are the master and the Redeemer of mankind; You who died and rose for us are the centre of world history; You are the only one who knows us and loves us; You are the companion and the friend of life; You are the man of sorrow and hope; You are the light and the truth, You are indeed "the way, the truth and the life"; You are the bread and the source of living water to satisfy our hunger and our thirst; You are the shepherd, our guide, our example, our comfort, our brother; You were small, poor, a humiliated worker and patient in suffering.

Lord, You have founded a new kingdom, where the poor are blessed, where peace is the principle of coexistence, where the pure in heart and weeping are exalted and consoled, where sinners can be forgiven, where all are brothers.

Lord Jesus, You are the beginning and the end, the secret of history, the key of destiny; you are the mediator and the bridge between heaven and earth; You are the son of man because you are the Son of God eternal, infinite; You are the Son of Mary, blessed among all women, your mother in the flesh, and our mother. Jesus Christ, You are the announcement, You are the voice that resounds on earth for ever. Amen. (From the speeches of Paul VI)

XIII Thursday – THE DEATH OF SAINT RITA

There is a place where the pilgrims pause silently, moved and in prayer: the small cell where the saint died May 22, 1457, at the age of 76 years. The body of Rita, tired and defeated by the infirmities of old age, by her physical sufferings and the many moral trials, was undone like the worn tent of the traveller from the long journey through the desert of life, and welcomed the last sunset of day to enter the day that knows no sunset.

Time seems to have stopped at that 22 May 1457; the "drop of time" no longer flows in the troubled river of her existence, but the book of life is always open and everyone can read the design of the God who chooses the humble creatures to implement his grand designs.

In the 40 years in the monastery the Augustinian nun, immersed in the richness of silence, still reveals the mystery of salvation to many souls uncertain and doubtful in the path of life; from her poor nun's cell, like a window on the world, she has seen every fragment of her earthly day, has contemplated, with the heart of the eternal child, the sunrises and sunsets of the Umbrian skies; with the soul of a nun she has followed the existence of humanity, has participated in the endless suffering of creatures, and all the devotees still want to remember the lesson of her earthly experience. The life of every man is composed of several chapters of history, it is a journey with many stages, it is a pilgrimage of faith.

Historically and humanly speaking, Rita of Cascia does not belong to the "category" of the people that matter, of extraordinary or charismatic creatures; her word never resounded in the republican and citizen's milieu of her city; her earthly journey is strewn with small human gestures that have the substance and the scent of true love and true faith without miracles. She lived her earthly events not with the heart burdened by the slavery of creatures, not with the illusion of the

promised land around the corner; she lived indeed her existential reality as in a boundless desert of misunderstanding and loneliness.

Rita of Cascia is the woman of optimism, of Christian hope; the laywoman who knew how to walk on the treacherous waters of human wickedness without drowning. The housewife of Roccaporena did not follow Christ because she had seen the miracles, but because she believed deeply in the word of God; her faith was not the "cheap good sense" of a certain practical philosophy, but was the wisdom that comes from the Beatitudes.

Every year, on the evening of May 21, Rita's death is remembered by the spectacle of the procession, called "Fire of the faith." Tradition records that the Cascians, having learned of the death of the saint, came to the monastery with lighted torches to venerate their fellow citizen who would make their city famous throughout the world. That first pilgrimage is recalled by the fantastic night of thousands of torches that illuminate the city and surrounding area, and burn in the vigil night as if waiting to greet the dawn of the feast and join in the songs and the prayers of the pilgrims who come from all over the world to worship the "Saint of the impossible."

The saints remind us that there is a science of life and a science of dying; the people of our time forget the second and think of the first. According to an expeditious and practical way of thinking, in the eyes of man life is seen as provisional and death as the ultimate reality. Jesus, however, reverses the relationship: death becomes temporary and life becomes eternal. Over each deceased person we can repeat the mysterious and consoling words of Christ uttered in the episode of the resurrected child: "Do not cry for the child is not dead but asleep" (Matt. 9:24). Wrangling with death is impossible: either we accept it peacefully or suffer it painfully. Death is a chapter that only God writes. We all live under this Damoclean sword. The great book of life has this chapter: death. In death the reason can lead to despair, faith, however, makes us accept it in conformity to the will of God. Indeed, faith sees in death the beginning

of true life, eternal life. Death always remains a mysterious border that separates men into three positions: those who have the assurance of eternal life, those who have the confidence that after death there is nothing, and the many who live in uncertainty of what is after death. For all death remains an impenetrable mystery.

The pages of the Gospel and the liturgy for the deceased are full of pleading for God's forgiveness; this is not due to a psychological terror in preparation for the judgment of God, but to make us better appreciate the joy of faith that assures us of the resurrection to live everlasting life.

Today in many Christians, who have died in the eschatological sense, their death was surrounded by silence, fear, or attempts to trivialize it. For centuries the church has taught us to pray that death not surprise us suddenly; now sudden death is considered a blessing. Pascal reminds us that men, not being able to defeat death, prefer not to think about it so as not to disturb their happiness.

PRAYER

We know that all men are intent on living life in prosperity and well-being, and no one cares to know the number of days left to live. Yet, Lord, we know that we are dust and will return to dust; we are all aware of our "finitude," that we are leaves that germinate in the spring and that the autumn wind shakes from the tree, caressing momentarily in the air and laying on the cold ground where they will die.

We believers are convinced that death is part of the natural order of things and that knowledge of the deep meaning of life is related to the mysterious sense of death.

Teach us, Lord, to number our days that we may gain wisdom of heart; we ask for the wisdom to help us understand that our life is a passing shadow, that our days are a breath, an impalpable breath of wind, that the length of our existence is like the span of the palm of our hand, that our hours go by as fast as the shuttle weaving the cloth briefly and suddenly stopping because the thread is broken.

Our Lord, we do not ask that the dead return to life to assure ourselves of eternal life; Your word is enough for us, we believe in you, O Lord of life and death; we want to live and die as those who "hope", the hope that comes from your death and your resurrection.

When the time has come for us to "set sail" to the port of the eternal homeland, grant, O Lord, that we may see in death the "seventh day" of our eternal rest in the new heavens and the new earth, and the Biblical Sabbath of our timeless peace, remembering your divine rest from the works of the creation of the world.

Meanwhile, Lord, may there burn in our hearts the same faith that led your servant Rita to live on earth as a pilgrim, and may our lamps not go out so that, vigilant in prayer and in the expectation of our hour, we may be introduced by you into the eternal homeland. Amen.

XIV Thursday – THE MESSAGE OF SAINT RITA

The Middle Ages was the world of St. Rita, that mysterious world and with so many human and religious contradictions; we live in 2000, a time of secularism and great religious indifference. The world of Rita was the small world closed amid the mountains of her Umbria, our world is that of international relations that make it close, but so complex.

What is the message of St. Rita, the village woman of fragile physique, with a thin face, and intelligent-looking and strong-willed gaze, that we see on the solemn casket of 1457? It is the historical and spiritual profile, the epigraph from an unknown dialect poet of the time. The message comes from the silence and poverty of the cell, from the expression of the mystic saint who, with her right hand shows the thorn of the stigmata.

The message of Saint Rita is still valid and relevant because it is the Gospel message. Rita's life is a living Gospel; she is the woman who not only gave up everything for the kingdom of God, but gave up even herself; she loved God more than her father, her mother, her husband and her children. (Matt. 10:37)

Rita's life is the message of holiness that makes the creature the protagonist of one's life in freedom and dignity, but without putting oneself in the first place. In front of this woman, there arises a rhetoric that would like to affirm a certain "conflict" between religious ideals and everyday life; a purely rationalistic movement to emphasize the impossibility of living the ideals of the Gospel, to highlight the supposed immaturity of the Saints and the nonsense of certain religious principles. For the woman of Roccaporena who was always good, submissive, constantly irenic and conciliatory, who lived the "politics of the other cheek," we can use the biblical reference: she lived outside the camp, out of the mentality of his world and that culture, but not out of history. She did not keep for herself her religious convictions, she lived and witnessed to them in the family, in society and in difficult human relations. Her holiness did not give her an "easy pass" to live a puerile irenicism, poetic dreams and false utopias; with its dynamic reality it gives us the opportunity to be men and women who build their lives not on sand, but on rock.

Rita "saw with the heart" the invisible reality of faith to remind us that there is a dramatic threat not regarding the destiny of generic man, but regarding the man of our time, as the authoritative voice of the Church always reminds us. The ideologies of any colour, though presented as companions of man, do not improve man. Honesty and morality are not a "call to arms", they are instead the greatest ideals of the believer, the atheist or the indifferent, because honesty has no colour and can be found in a palace or in a hut.

Even today, modern life offers spectacles of sincere humanity and wonderful progress, but it also offers glimpses of extreme squalor, of an "existential vacuum" and of so much anguish. In this climate, faith is like the wave that dies uselessly on the naked and deserted cliff. Christianity is for the mature. We have come to the point of such moral confusion that it is permissible to ask: are we not perhaps near the time in which in addition to abortion, even murder, theft and drugs will be decriminalized?

There is now an "intelligence" that is working hard to purify and demythologize Christianity from every magical aspect to make it more scientific and credible. It is the rationalist trap that promotes research, but clips the wings of creativity, for which the historical present, more than school, is repetition. Our civilization has been rejected despite the many teachers, it has been rejected despite the many prophets; it is a culture of darkness in which we see the stars of many values that become more and more removed from our planet.

The saints, these creatures with a human face who represent, as in a transparency, the face of God, they remind us that if our life has rights, it also has duties, and the Lord grants the first and asks for the second not to satisfy our aesthetic taste, but to practice a radical change of life.

Our saint has left nothing written, and has left nothing said; her silence is the testimony of a creature that had no importance in the history of her time. Her devotion, first contained in the Augustinian churches, gradually exploded into a crescendo of pilgrims who make of her temple the place of encounter with God and one another, making Cascia the land of the spirit, the crossroads of the particular presence of the divine.

Rita's spirituality is like a tree planted by streams of water, whose roots are always fresh and whose leaves never fade. Rita of Cascia is the "citizen of the world": in our hearts there is a place also for her; and we have come to her school of a young girl, wife, mother, widow and Augustinian nun so that in our everyday walk, made up of joys and sorrows, we can feel her as a friend, sister and mother.

PRAYER

We have travelled, O Lord, the way of thy handmaid, Rita, who was able to skilfully harmonize the activities of a family woman with the contemplation of the mystic; that was able to make her life a profession of faith, a liturgy of constant praise, a fraternal communion with the suffering.

The world, O Lord, needs these creatures, sisters of the earth who are impassioned with heaven, who by their example remind us of the precariousness of the human values that have made it impossible to live in the atmosphere of our daily lives, making it violent, selfish and cynical to the point of creating a subdivision of consciences and generating the crisis of reason by proclaiming that you, Lord, are dead in the institutions and in the human heart.

In this confusion of Babel, grant, O Lord, that your Church be the ark of universal salvation, which awakens in consciences the truths that are the way to heaven, that it may be holy in the truth, in unity and in charity to bring the light of Your gospel into this modern and secularised society; that your post-conciliar Church, like a springtime of the Spirit, may overcome the eclipse of the sacred

with dialogue, with the encounter between different cultures so that modernity may be synonymous with new religious experience that reveals to the world the face of your Father who is infinitely good and merciful, who sends the sun on the good and the bad.

Lord, you know that man is always the "sick man" because, ignoring the legacy of original sin, he presumes to be naturally good and honest, because he is confident of his self-sufficiency and self-justification without resorting to your grace and your forgiveness.

O St. Rita, our great advocate, your example tells us that life is not a fight that is won by cunning and violence, but with the strength that comes from God, our faithful companion for all the days of our life; Your constant silence and eloquent episodes of your life are the best profession of faith and the suffering and lived witness that the Lord Jesus is the Holy One of God, the Meek one, the one Hungry and Thirsty for Justice, the Merciful, the Pure of heart, the Worker of peace and the Persecuted.

O saint of the impossible, your silent message is like water, humble and hidden in the bowels of the earth, which feeds the vegetation and forms springs that quench the thirst of creatures. As for us, your followers, your radical choice was the most valuable perfume of your humanity and your faith, creating in us a crisis of conscience with the desire to follow you; for others, starting from a pseudo-cultural and sociological diagnosis, you are, o sweet saint, the misunderstood and contested woman of the gospel who perfumed the head of Christ before his Passion. Amen.

XV Thursday – THE SIGN OF THE TIMES

The expression "sign of the times", dear to Pope John XXIII and endorsed by Vatican Council II, interprets and reflects the situation of the prophetic Church in the world. Observing the "sign of the times" means seeing the "sign of God" in the reality of our time.

Jesus rebukes his audience: "When it is evening, you say: Fair weather, for the sky is red, and in the morning: today it will be stormy, for the sky is dark." (Matt. 16:2-3) Jesus defines his generation as perverse and unfaithful because it asks for a special and absolute sign, and does not see the signs of truth and freedom that he brings with his mission. Jesus practically treats his audience like the blind, and urges them to open their eyes to see the light of truth and salvation.

Today what are the "signs of God" in our society? What are the signs of hope that animate the weak lamp of our faith? The situation of the world manifests clearly three wounds: the ignorance of some, the fanaticism of a few and the resignation of very, very many. Our society is full of fortune tellers who read the "signs of the palms," but not the "signs of the times" according to the mind of Jesus.

Understanding the "sign of the times" is to understand that faith is not the horror of what comes after death, it is not a bearer of anxiety of the future, or the fear of the "day after"; faith is not the fear of the apocalypse. Man in our society is obsessed with the fear that comes from collective anxiety which, day by day, worsens towards a nightmare that is not a simple warning siren, but the apocalyptic vision of a mysterious and incomprehensible future even to the most reckless science fiction. In this shipwreck of values man desperately tries poor life rafts in the hope of surviving in the small world of the survivors.

To the modern, evolved, wealthy man of post-industrial civilization, Jesus offers, with his Gospel, the orienting compass and the anchor of salvation; he proposes the Gospel as a universal moral

revolution to create, as in a second creation, the new man in the spirit; he offers himself as a "sign of Jonah" of death and resurrection.

The Vatican Council II gives a man a sense of his high dignity: "Only God, who created man in His own image and ransomed him from sin, provides an adequate answer to human problems, and that by means of the revelation accomplished in his Son, made man. Anyone who follows Christ, the perfect man, becomes himself a man." (GS,41)

This "soulless" world with a life devoid of communion and coexistence, is a conglomeration of society in which millions of human beings die due to injustice, violence, cynicism, selfishness and hunger: the spectacle is under the eyes of all amid the indifference of people; it will be difficult for history to forgive our civilization its responsibility for this antihuman situation. How to solve these problems? The pretext of a miracle does not free us from a bad conscience. On the contrary. The true conscience is to bind the will of God with the expectation of His Kingdom on earth, the Kingdom that we must not see as the "terrible day of the Lord", but as the fullness of the world of the new heavens and the new earth.

The work of God is always countered by man who with his freedom rejects the salvation of God, the man who is scandalized at the mission of Jesus. We read in the gospel that the Pharisees were offended because Jesus forgave sins, because the last workers received the same pay as the first; because the love of the father of the prodigal son scandalised the elder son. With these "scandals" we understand the Kingdom of God, that Kingdom which has a different logic from that of the world, that Kingdom which belongs to the humble, to the last, to the poor. The saints have understood the "scandal" of the Gospel, and in this light we see the life of Rita.

What are the signs of the times of Rita of Cascia? Rita, too, was the witness of a seemingly humanly defeated love, but a winner in the reality of the Gospel; Rita also made the choice of a faith that is misunderstood and hindered by the people; Rita also scandalised her contemporaries by forgiving her husband's killer and preferring the death of her children to the sin of revenge. The laywoman of Roccaporena, too, was the woman of "folly" according to St. Paul, the creature who, in the name of God, loved men to make them brothers, loved the earth to make it closer to heaven.

To the Pharisees of her time Rita recalled the Beatitudes, she confirmed the need of radical renewal of man through the forgiveness and mercy of God. The Beatitudes are always, in the life of the world, the dividing line between the old and new, they will always be the eternal "sign of the times" in the sense that the blessed, according to Jesus, there are those who have benefited from his power and his goodness with miracles in body and spirit; they are those who hunger and thirst for peace and justice.

I want to finish the Ritian path by offering readers the memory of a truly historic date (19-20 May 2000) when the venerable body of Rita was brought to Rome to mark the 1st centenary of the canonization that took place May 24, 1900 by Pope Leo XIII.

It is not rhetoric to speak about the real triumph of our Saint with an itinerary that is perhaps too brief, but intense in the events and extraordinary due to the multitude of those participating.

It is not news but lived history in the unique setting of the greatness of Rome. In the jubilee of her time Rita and her fellow sisters went to venerate the tomb of the Apostle Peter with a true spirit of



repentance, along the long and difficult journey on foot and between the many logistical difficulties; while for the Jubilee of 2000 Rita "went" to Rome by helicopter. What a difference of time and means!

The Roman apotheosis begins in the church of St. Augustine, filled to capacity with various Eucharistic liturgies celebrated by the different families of the Augustinian order.

Indescribable is the spectacle in St. Peter's Square, where the humble daughter of St. Augustine received the homage of the Pope, the cardinals, and the bishops of an endless multitude of the faithful.

A Ritian and Augustinian Jubilee Day, immortalized by television and a documentary that one can always see and relive.

Moving was the return of the Saint to her village of Roccaporena the afternoon of May 20. She returns after centuries to her land, to see once again her home, the church filled with so many memories, and especially the meeting with families that moved people to tears of joy and tenderness.

The closure of the historic pilgrimage was a procession- a river of people from Roccaporena to Cascia in the deep night under the stars and lit by a thousand flames.

A Ritian itinerary with songs and prayers, a historical journey of fellow citizens and countless devotees who came from every corner of Italy and abroad.

At one o'clock on May 20, the day before the vigil of her feast day, Rita returned to her home, to the monastery where, as guardian of her city and loving mother, she watches over all to protect everyone. The true spirituality of Rita, as a "sign of the times", was the awareness of "her human limitations" for which she totally abandoned herself to the faith, convinced that it can reconcile human ideals with Christian realism; she did not have the temptation of an "earthly messianism", she did not subjected to that devotional and weepy resignation because she was convinced of what "she could obtain or refuse, and what she could change or leave as before."

Rita of Cascia is not a woman outside history, she is not a myth created by fanaticism, by the "Catholic subculture", or by popular imagination; Rita knew how to live in the city of men with the faith and the spirit of the city of God. In the dust of the tragic family and town events she did not consider herself a defeated woman, nor a "heroically lashed" Christian, posing as a victim of the wickedness of man: as a true disciple of Christ she was able to walk on the treacherous waters of human passions without sinking.

PRAYER

Lord, we are convinced that the "sign of the times" will not be a universal flood, nor the day of the apocalyptic "day after", nor the tower of Babel, nor the burning experience of Sodom and Gomorrah, nor even the atomic holocaust; but you, and you alone are the salvation of the world, according to the word of the prophet: "They shall look on him whom they pierced." (Zech. 12:10), because you, Lord, will be on the cross until the end of the world.

By the strength of Your word there will be torn yet the veils of many temples; there will condense on earth thick darkness to prove the falsity of the poor men of truth; the magnitude of the atheistic civilization will collapse like the earthquake that shook the slopes of Calvary at your

death. They collapsed and there will collapse all the ideals of the man who lives the delirium that he is the Almighty.

We live, Lord, in this modern time, said to be one of secularization, materialism and eclipse of the sacred, in which man no longer expects liberation from you, because he believes himself self-sufficient and self-justified; he no longer desires your paradise after death, he lives only to possess the land; the present generation no longer asks you for an extraordinary sign that your enemies asked for, people today no longer feel the need of the coming of your kingdom.

In our perennial exodus where everything is commodified, the temptation assails us, O Lord, to shake the dust of this earth and abandon those men who do not want to hear your word of salvation; in such a world we want to be the "remnant of Israel", that is, the witnesses of your Gospel, living as foreigners in our country and as citizens in a foreign land for walking, like Abraham, toward the goal that only you know.

You Lord, will not abandon man, the eternal nomad, on the roads of the world; you will always be the traveling companion of this weary pilgrim who consoles himself dreaming of a timeless history, without space or boundaries, and a journey without a finishing line.

We want to be among the number of your saints, as Rita of Cascia, whom you proclaim the Son of God, and each of us can say with faith: "O Lord my God, my only hope, listen graciously, do not allow me to desist from looking for you out of fatigue, but may I always seek your face with ardour. Amen.