

**HOMILY OF HIS EMINENCE CARDINAL CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
HOLY MASS FOR THE SOLEMN FEAST OF ST. RITA OF CASCIA
THE NATIONAL SHRINE OF ST. RITA OF CASCIA
PHILADELPHIA, PA
MAY 22, 2024**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

As the personal representative of the Holy Father to the Church in the United States, it is my privilege to convey to you the spiritual closeness and paternal affection of Pope Francis, and to wish all of you a happy and grace-filled feast of Saint Rita!

Speaking about St. Rita, Pope John Paul II once said:

“In her example of total surrender to God, in her transparent simplicity and in her steadfast fidelity to the Gospel, it is possible for us, too, to find the appropriate indication of how we are to be true Christians at the dawn of this third millennium.”¹

The Pope presented Rita “as a sign of hope, especially to families”, saying:

“Dear Christian families, by imitating her example, may you also know how to find in your fidelity to Christ the strength to fulfil your mission of service to the civilization of love.”²

Building a “civilization of love”: isn’t this what the Christian life is all about? Therefore, it is also what the life of every saint is about. My brothers and sisters, even though St. Rita lived 600 years ago, the particular characteristics of her holiness are very relevant to the moment of human history in which we are living now. What do I mean by this? I mean that St. Rita’s holiness consisted largely in being a *peacemaker* and a *unifier* when many people around her, including her fellow Catholics, were trapped in animosity and division.

During the 14th and 15th centuries in the place where St. Rita lived – what is now part of Italy – family feuds were common. The unwritten “code” of loyalty dictated that, in order to preserve your family’s honor, you must take vengeance against any family whose members harmed your own. We might be a little shocked to discover that this “*vendetta*” mentality existed among people who otherwise presented themselves as devout Catholics. But should this shock us? If we examine ourselves honestly, we can see how, in every age including our own, there are principles which, though contrary to the Gospel, have influence in the lives of many Catholics. That is why the world and the Church always need *prophets*. Saint Rita was a prophet for her day. This means that, in her own words and actions, she lived the true meaning of the Gospel, even when it contradicted the “false gospel” that prevailed – in this case, the custom of vengeance.

Rita’s own parents were widely known as peacemakers. They had not given in to the cultural mentality. Because of this, Rita was formed in the truth of Jesus’ commands which Saint Paul expounds in his letter to the Romans:

“Do not repay anyone evil for evil.... Live at peace with all.... Do not look for revenge.... Rather, ‘if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.’ Do not be conquered by evil, but conquer evil with good” (*Rom* 12:17a, 18, 19a, 20a, 21).

This Gospel of peace became a defining theme of Rita’s life. That is why, when the *vendetta* culture of her time led to the killing of her husband, she forgave the perpetrators and tried to dissuade her two sons from responding “an eye for an eye”. She knew that her sons felt it their “duty” to avenge their father’s murder; and so Rita prayed that they would be kept from this grave sin. Not much later, both of her sons died from a disease. While their untimely death kept them from enacting revenge, Rita now had to grieve not only her husband but also her sons.

Always ready to find hope in the midst of suffering, Rita realized that the tragic circumstances of her life had left her free to pursue the original dream of her youth: to be consecrated to God in religious life. Unfortunately, she was denied entrance to the local Augustinian convent. Within the community were some relatives of the family which was rival to the family of Rita’s husband. The sisters were concerned that ongoing violence between the families *outside* the convent walls could endanger unity *within* the convent.

Rita's conviction that God was calling her to the religious life made her persevere in her effort. Ultimately, by God's grace and the intercession of her patron saints – John the Baptist, St. Augustine, and St. Nicholas of Tolentino – she obtained what was humanly impossible: she mediated a final and lasting reconciliation between the two warring families. As a result of this covenant of peace, Rita was finally able to become an Augustinian sister. She lived out her days in fidelity to the religious rule, and became a saint through her conformity to the Paschal Mystery of Christ.

As the Collect Prayer for this Mass reminded us, the central witness of St. Rita is her conformity to the Cross of Christ, which, rather than being a cause of fear and depression, is truly the source of “wisdom and strength”.³ In John's Gospel, Jesus said that every branch that bears fruit “he prunes so that it bears more fruit” (*Jn* 15:2). This truth is strongly ratified in Rita's life. Every time Rita suffered the pain of loss – like a branch being cut back or pruned – she found the way to bear even more fruit for the Lord. And so, when she received in her own flesh a portion of our Lord's crown of thorns, this became an outward sign of the inner reality of her whole spiritual life.

My brothers and sisters, St. Rita's life is not meant to be an isolated instance of holiness – to be looked at and admired, but not touched, like some decorative vase on a shelf. She is our sister in Christ, who can help us by her prayers and example to insert our own lives into the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

In the midst of the animosity and violence that characterize our social relations today, the great sign of hope is the Cross of Christ. That Cross was an instrument of hatred and death; but Jesus responded to it with forgiveness and love. By rising from the dead, he opened to us a new way of living. It is the way in which St. Rita lived; and it is the reason that she now lives in the house of God. We can join her, for as our Lord said: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (*Mt* 5:9).

¹Pope John Paul II, Address on the Centenary of the Canonization of St. Rita of Cascia, 20 May 2000.

² *Ibid.*

³ Augustinian Missal, *Collect* for the Feast of Saint Rita of Cascia, Religious.