

FOREWORD BY ANTONIA SALZANO ACUTIS,  
MOTHER OF SAINT CARLO ACUTIS



real  
moms  
of real  
saints

COLLEEN PRESSPRICH

# Real Moms of Real Saints

By Colleen Pressprich

Foreword by Antonia Salzano Acutis,  
Mother of Saint Carlo Acutis



Library of Congress Control Number: 2024944916

ISBN 10: 0-8198-6052-2

ISBN 13: 978-0-8198-6052-1

The Scripture quotations contained herein are from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible: Catholic Edition*, copyright © 1989, 1993, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Excerpts from the English translation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* for use in the United States of America, copyright © 1994, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops—Libreria Editrice Vaticana. English translation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Modifications from the Editio Typica* copyright © 1997, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops—Libreria Editrice Vaticana. Used with permission.

Cover design by Caroline Erdman

Cover art by Georges d'Espagnat, *Sewing* (1933), Muséum of Fine Arts of the City of Paris.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

“P” and PAULINE are registered trademarks of the Daughters of St. Paul.

Copyright © 2025, Colleen Pressprich

---

Published by Pauline Books & Media, 50 Saint Pauls Avenue, Boston, MA 02130-3491

Printed in the U.S.A.

[www.pauline.org](http://www.pauline.org)

Pauline Books & Media is the publishing house of the Daughters of St. Paul, an international congregation of women religious serving the Church with the communications media.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

30 29 28 27 26 25

*For the mothers in my life—  
My mom, who has loved and supported me  
unconditionally all my life:  
I am the woman I am today because of you;*

*My mother-in-law,  
who has taught me so much  
about raising a large family;*

*My aunts Tisha and M,  
who have loved me as a daughter:  
I would be lost without you both;*

*And for Linda,  
my spiritual mom since I was eighteen,  
who taught me how to love the Lord  
and listen for his voice.*

# Contents

Foreword

xiii

Author's Acknowledgments

xvii

Introduction

1

Maria Rosa

Mother of Venerable Lúcia dos Santos

*Trusting in the Lord Through All Things*

7

Margaret

Mother of Saint John Bosco

*Loving Each Child God Gives Us*

23

Giuseppa

Mother of Saint Pio of Pietrelcina

*It Takes a Village*

37

Maria

Mother of Saint Maximilian Kolbe

*When We're Tempted to Act Out of Brokenness*

57

Zélie

Mother of Servant of God Léonie Martin  
and Saint Thérèse of Lisieux

*Forgiving Ourselves*

77

Emmelia and Macrina

Mother of Saints Basil the Great,  
Gregory of Nyssa, and Macrina the Younger

Mother of Saint Basil the Elder

*Looking Beyond Legends*

93

Columba

Mother of Blessed Hong Pil'chu

*Serving God in Spite of Others' Expectations*

109

Monica

Mother of Saint Augustine

*Rooting Our Identity in God*

123

Martha

Mother of Venerable Augustus Tolton

*Remaining Faithful in the Midst of Suffering*

143

Gertrude

Mother of Blessed Stanley Rother

*Embracing the Ordinary*

163

Conclusion

183

Acknowledgments

187

## Foreword

THE MISSION OF EVERY MOTHER and father should be to help their children develop the divine presence within them so they may more closely resemble our Creator and Savior. Michelangelo is said to have visualized the masterpiece he wanted to create out of each formless marble mass. So too, envisioning Jesus Christ, mothers and fathers should nurture the reflection of God's image in their children. Just as a sculptor draws out the character that he or she wishes to emerge after contemplating it within himself, so parents are to keep in view the *Imago Dei*, the Image of God, in order to become true mentors in Christ.

The Second Vatican Council stressed the importance of sainthood, not only for priests or religious brothers and sisters, but for laypeople as well. We can teach our children about this. Why does the Church declare someone a saint? Not because that person receives apparitions or uses certain gifts. Those are graces that God gives freely, not because of personal merit. Sainthood is living a life of heroic virtue every day. And virtue is the firm attitude of our will toward the good. Sainthood is something we have to desire and work for. Each day we can start

again. When we make mistakes, we can always start over. If we trust God, he will help us.

We will be able to help our children grow more Christlike by reforming our lives as a family and seeking spiritual strength through the sacraments. The earlier we do this, the better. Through the sacraments, in which our Savior transmits to us the salvation that he died on the cross to give us, we receive the grace to be transfigured into Christ. It's important to understand this, for some people disregard the sacramental life. They judge the Church by the regretful behavior of certain priests and consider the sacraments of no significance. This attitude is flawed. We have to trust that the sacraments are the means that God uses to help us reach the eternal life to which we he calls us. They are effective signs of God's mercy toward us. Through them we have salvation. For example, when we sin, we have Confession. And to sustain us and help us remember that we are called to holiness, we have the Eucharist. When we receive Communion frequently, we become stronger, because God fights the battles of life alongside us. He gives us his strength. The sacraments are very important.

To develop a spiritual relationship with your children, pray with them, help them to grow in virtue, teach them to make sacrifices for souls. Whatever time you can manage to spend together, make it quality time. Go to sanctuaries together, read the lives of saints, read the Bible, make a special pilgrimage. If your children are quite open to faith, try to let them follow those feelings without hindering them. Be instruments of God. My son Carlo and I developed a special relationship that was centered around Christ, so he and I had a deep relationship. Sometimes it's a sacrifice to spend family time together, but it's

important to make an effort to nurture the spiritual side of our children. Not so much the material side, because what is material provides only fleeting happiness. We know that everything material is going to disappear. It's spiritual values that give hope and meaning to life.

This book will be helpful for parents who sincerely try to place God at the center of their family. As my son Carlo said: "If Christ possesses our heart, then we too will possess the Infinite," and we will be truly happy people.

ANTONIA SALZANO ACUTIS,  
Mother of Saint Carlo Acutis

## Introduction

I HELD MY DAUGHTER IN a safe hold as the emotions raged through her. She had gotten stronger since the last time we had gone through this. I held her and we both cried. She screamed and writhed, adrenaline surging through her small body, out of control, not knowing how to stop. I rocked her and murmured soft words of love until she calmed in my arms, all the while wondering how to love her best through the struggles and praying desperately for help.

A gifted child, she has been endowed with incredible talents. She is also a child with ADHD and anxiety, a child who feels things deeply and does not always know what to do with those feelings.

There are times when raising her feels like walking along the edge of a knife. She is not going to be mediocre or live a humdrum life. No, she is meant for a life of depth and meaning. This child of mine, like all of our children, was made for greatness. My job as a mother is to help her achieve it, to help mold her heart and form her conscience, and to help her discern the plans God has for her.

Sometimes that feels overwhelming. Sometimes it objectively is overwhelming. Sometimes, I don't know if I can do it. But then I remember the women who came before me, the women who succeeded at the very task I have set before me, the women who guided their children to know God's love, his will, and his purpose. Their lives model for me what it means to rely on the Lord and his grace, and their witness serves as a steady support in difficult times.

That night, as I sat there holding my sobbing daughter, it was their help I asked for, their intercession I sought, both for her and for myself.

We all need a tribe, the people whom we live and labor alongside—a group of people bound by ties of kinship and trust, running deeper than friendship. From the very beginning humans were created to be in relationship, both with God and with each other. As women especially, we feel the need for those relationships very deeply. My life would be much lonelier and far less fruitful without my own tribe. It is in my relationships with other women that I find nourishment to sustain me and hope to encourage me when I am struggling.

I'm blessed to be surrounded by women who hold me and support me—my mother, mother-in-law, sisters-in-law, aunts, and dear friends. But a Catholic's tribe can and does transcend time and place. When I ask for prayers, when I look for help, when I need community and company, I'm not limited to just the people around me or even alive on this earth. I believe in the Communion of Saints, that the men and women who came before us and now reside in glory in heaven are still able to be present to us and in relationship with us.

The women you'll meet in these pages are part of my heavenly tribe—moms of some of the most-loved saints in the world. From the ancient Church to the present day, these women come from all cultures and social backgrounds. They are vastly different from one another, and yet, at the same time, they share an important commonality: they are all authentically and fully Catholic women who loved the Lord and desired to share that love with their children.

These are real women, real mothers. Their stories are complicated ones. There is no cut and dry, black and white; this work exists in shades of gray, because in many ways, so did these women. So do we all. As such, my aim is to tell you the truth, as far as I was able to find it, about these women's lives—the holy and the messy, the clear-cut and the complicated—in the hopes that they will encourage, reassure, and teach you the way they have me.

As I have researched these women, sifted through their letters, sat with their interviews, read stories about them, and even spoken to their children and grandchildren, I have found myself living with them in a very real way. I lean on their strength and learn from their wisdom as I try to raise my own future saints.

More than that, though, in the stories of their lives, I have come face to face with parts of myself, some good, some less so. In recognizing their flaws, it is somehow easier to accept my own. In seeing where they have triumphed and held faith, I recognize that it is possible for me to do the same. These are women who give me hope, in their faithfulness and in their brokenness, in their successes as well as in their failures.

We hold a lot of things in tension as Catholic women, as Catholic mothers: our weaknesses and our strengths, those times

that we get it right and those days that we yell at our kids for what feels like the entire day. None of us are perfect; many of us are walking around with deep wounds that affect our ability to love, and as a result, our parenting. I think that we can all recognize the truth that any one person can be both a saint and a sinner in his or her life. Sometimes the gritty reality of that truth can be uncomfortable to sit with. Sometimes it helps to have a companion along the way because we are all of us moms here on earth still journeying, striving to get ourselves and our children to heaven.

These women may not be Saints with a capital S themselves, though some are. I make no judgment outside of the Church's own when or whether these women have passed the gates of heaven, but heaven is full of uncanonized saints, and I suspect that these ladies are among them. And just in case I'm right, I ask for their prayers along with their children's.

As you read these chapters (and don't feel as though you have to read them in order; each can be read on its own), I encourage you to take them to prayer. Sit with the Lord and ask him what he would like to illuminate in your own heart through the telling of their lives. What anecdotes make you feel seen? What shocked you? What made you angry? Where do you see yourself? Whom do you feel is a kindred spirit? Whose story didn't resonate? Why? Let your reactions be a jumping-off point to prayer and growth in your own motherhood.



Venerable Lúcia dos Santos, intercede for us.

Saint John Bosco, pray for us.

Saint Padre Pio, pray for us.

Saint Maximilian Kolbe, pray for us.

Saint Thérèse of Lisieux and Servant of God

Léonie Martin, intercede for us.

Saints Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa,

and Macrina the Younger, pray for us.

Saint Basil the Elder, pray for us.

Venerable Augustus Tolton, intercede for us.

Blessed Hong Pil'chu, pray for us.

Saint Augustine, pray for us.

Blessed Stanley Rother, pray for us.

Mothers of Saints, pray for us.



## Maria Rosa

1869–1942, PORTUGAL

Mother of Venerable Lúcia dos Santos

### *Trusting in the Lord Through All Things*

*THIS IS TOO BIG FOR me.*

The words resonate.

My own refrain is similar: *I didn't sign up for this.*

My husband is a urology resident. In his second year of residency, he had to move across the state for four months because his program has a contract with a hospital there—leaving me and the children behind.

When you apply for a residency program, what most people don't realize is that you don't have a choice where you end up. You interview wherever you get offered an interview, and then you make a list, ranking each place. The programs in turn rank all of the candidates they interviewed, and all the data is plugged into a computer whose algorithm spits out one spot per person. Once you've matched, you're a part of that program. There's no appeal, and there are no alterations.

We found out about the cross-state move after my husband matched. Knowing it would be a problem to be so far away from his family, my husband asked for help from his program director right away. The program director initially told us that he would help find a way around this four-month departure but later decided it would be too difficult, would rock too many boats, wasn't worth the effort. If my husband didn't complete his residency, his medical degree would be worthless. And so he went, and I had no choice but to watch him leave.

*I didn't sign up for this.*

These words were my silent scream as I lay awake in the night, trying not to wake the baby lying beside me. Trying, and sometimes failing, to hold on to the words of a wise priest: "being free also means consenting to what we did not choose."

The words felt hollow. I held on to hope. I asked for the intercession of a woman who knew the desperation I was feeling. I begged for her prayers because she too had known this pain, a separation that she could not control, a time without a voice.

*This is too big for me.*

In a small village in Portugal, more than a century ago now, there lived a woman who persisted in faith and hope, who surrendered with grace, despite her many struggles.

Her presence is a balm in my moments of struggling with surrender.



Maria Rosa Ferreira was born in Aljustrel, Portugal, in 1869. It was, and still is, a small village. Before the miraculous events of 1917, it was of very little importance, identical to the

other rural Portuguese villages. Maria Rosa just called it home. She was married there to António dos Santos on November 19, 1890. She raised her seven children there, including little Lúcia, who would soon rise to fame as one of the three shepherds of the Fátima apparitions, and who is now on the road to being canonized. The family wasn't wealthy, but Maria could note with pride that her children never lacked for shoes. Each member of the family had a role, and they worked hard, a tight-knit family unit.

As for Maria Rosa, she was a pious woman, very careful in her observance of her Catholic faith, which is the attribute most noted about her by those around her. The word "pious" today connotes images of pearl-clutching, hard-nosed women more worried about the rules being followed than about the state of the souls they encounter. But in early 1900s Portugal, this word was the highest of praise. It meant someone who lived their faith in every single moment. And indeed, Maria Rosa was beloved in her village for her hospitality and willingness to care for neighbors in need. Her strict adherence to the Gospel was born out of love, not fear. She was both midwife and catechist—helping birth children into the world and then later into faith.

We have, as Catholics, the greatest gift in the entire world: the Blessed Sacrament, Jesus, come down to us, Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity, present in every tabernacle of the world. How easy it is for me to forget this. I have an inkling that Maria Rosa dos Santos never did. In fact, Lúcia notes in her memoirs that she was taught from childhood by her mother that upon passing a church she was never to miss the opportunity to stop and pay a visit to Jesus, a practice that she maintained throughout her entire life.

Lúcia writes: “Mother was never satisfied with our just being able to repeat the words of our catechism. She tried hard to explain everything so we would really understand the meaning of the words. She used to say that just repeating catechism without understanding was worse than useless. We used to ask her all kinds of questions and it seemed that she explained them even better than the priest in church. One day I asked her how it was that the fire of hell did not destroy the damned like the wood in the fire. She asked us if we had ever noticed how a cone cast into a fire could seem to burn and burn without being destroyed. This rather frightened us, and we made firm resolutions not to sin ourselves.”<sup>1</sup>

She taught Lúcia the lessons of the catechism well enough that by age six, Lúcia had impressed two different priests with her knowledge. What was even more valuable, however, was that Maria Rosa had imparted to her daughter an intense desire to receive the Hidden Jesus.

Upon hearing at first that she would have to wait another year to make her first Communion, Lúcia immediately began to sob, and begged for the pastor to change his mind. This he did at the intervention of a visiting priest, and Lúcia writes, “I could never express the joy I felt. Off I went, clapping my hands with delight, and running all the way home to give the good news to my mother.”<sup>2</sup>

---

1. John de Marchi, IMC, *The True Story of Fatima: A Complete Account of the Fatima Apparitions* (The Fátima Center, 2009), 19, Kindle.

2. Lúcia dos Santos, *Fatima in Lucia's Own Words: Sister Lucia's Memoirs*, ed. Louis Kondor, SVD, trans. Dominican Nuns of Perpetual Rosary (np: Fatima Postulation Center, 1976), 55.

That Lúcia's first thought upon hearing the good news was to run to her mom is a testament to the deep love between them. The relationship between them was not built on fear; the authority the mother held over the daughter was founded on something much greater—love. And that love is what allowed Maria Rosa to pass on the faith and love she surely had herself to her daughter.

When children are young, their memories are even more tied to their senses and emotions than those of adults. This is something Maria Rosa knew intuitively. We can see it in the way that she taught her children: In the warm months, catechism was taught by Maria outside during siesta. In the winter, the children gathered “round the fireside, as we sat roasting and eating chestnuts and a sweet variety of acorns.”<sup>3</sup> I can just picture the scene: cozy, welcoming, and peaceful.

As a mom, I can recognize the wisdom in Maria's decision to pair learning the lessons of faith with sweet food and the warmth of the fire. She engaged all of her children's senses in the lessons, and rooted faith with feelings of security—of being warm and well-fed. These emotional cues make their way into our memories and would have been long associated with the instructions Lúcia was given.

Religion is more than just the imparting of information. The passing on of faith requires a sharing of hearts. Holy parents do not always produce saints. We all know parents who, though holy and devout themselves, have children who have fallen away from the faith or have made bad choices in their lives. Parental faith is by no means a complete safeguard for children, and teaching that

---

3. Dos Santos, *Fatima in Lucia's Own Words*, 54.

faith is by no means a guarantee that they will retain it. But Maria Rosa clearly did everything within her power to ensure that her children did.

Maria Rosa managed not only to teach the lessons of the catechism, the doctrine and dogma of the Catholic Church, to her children, but also to give them an opportunity to make that faith their own by helping them to build relationships with Jesus as a real person, to know and love God intimately. The three little seers of Fátima may be well known throughout the world for their faith and devotion to our Lady, but the foundation for that was laid in the home of Maria Rosa well before the 1917 apparitions. There is no doubt that their faith flourished in the rich soil of their family.

It was all as was expected. Until it wasn't.



On May 13, 1917, everything changed for the dos Santos family,<sup>4</sup> though they did not realize it at the time. And though she was one of the most well-known and well-respected members of her community, Maria Rosa was about to be sidelined to the outskirts of history. She was going to live the rest of her life in the shadow of the apparitions of Fátima, a minor player in a major event. That's how I, and I'm sure many others, first encountered her.

---

4. On May 13, 1917, the Virgin Mary appeared to three children, one of whom was Maria Rosa's daughter Lúcia. Mary would appear to the children seven times, and the Fátima apparitions would become among the most famous in the world.

I confess that as a teenager visiting Fátima for the first time, I thought little about the families of the three seers, the people who shaped their lives before the apparitions began and who continued to walk with them after they ended. It was only in becoming a parent myself, looking to instill in my own children what so drew me to the three little seers of Fátima, that I found myself turning to the pages of Lúcia's memoirs that concern her family life, drawn more and more to the words about her mother.

I was surprised by the love and warmth I found there—wasn't this the villain of the piece? The doubter? The woman who punished her daughter for supposedly lying about the apparitions? That's the version of Maria Rosa most often found in books or movies about Fátima.<sup>5</sup>

I doubt that Maria Rosa would be surprised that even in death her reputation has been tarnished by those who did not know her, did not choose to understand her. She was a woman shattered by the Fátima apparitions, not uplifted by them. While the pilgrims came in droves to seek and find peace in the Cova da Iria, the field where the apparitions took place, Maria Rosa lost the tranquility and quiet that had, until then, been the hallmark of her life. She would never gain it back.

And yet, she did not waver. She was tested and tried to the limits of what anyone can imagine. Even Lúcia admitted in her memoir that the cross her mother was asked to bear for the message of Mary was greater than her own. As a mother, I agree wholeheartedly.

---

5. It's worth noting that many of the versions of Maria Rosa dos Santos that are found in the media are taken from a single source—the writings of Father de Marchi, a priest who did not arrive at Fátima until after Maria Rosa's death.

Her family lost its livelihood to the pilgrims who tramped through the fields they owned. Their best fields turned to mud, the ground no longer suitable for planting. What was more, there was nowhere for the sheep to graze. And Lúcia was suddenly too much in demand to shepherd them. Maria Rosa responded with prudence and common sense. The sheep were sold, the field abandoned. When asked about the hardships, she only replied, “If it was Our Lady who appeared there, she will help us get along without the Cova da Iria.”<sup>6</sup>

The limits of Maria Rosa’s hospitality and generosity—witnessed to by neighbors, family, and friends alike as tremendous—were stretched to a breaking point when strangers knocked on the door or, more often, barged in without knocking, at all hours of the day and night, careless of the hour. Seeking only to satisfy their selfish curiosity and speak to her daughter, they treated Maria Rosa as a poor, ignorant nobody, there to serve their needs.

Her husband, her rock, the other half of her, started spending more and more time at the local tavern, not drinking as was often suggested, but rather, hiding from the crowds that invaded his home. Like his wife, he could not stand them, but unlike her, he had the freedom to avoid them. Ant3nio would die soon after, their marriage having lost much of its intimacy and easy friendship.



---

6. Dos Santos, *Fatima in Lucia's Own Words*, Vol. 2, 29.

A woman of her times, Maria Rosa was faithful to the Church's teaching, and to her parish priest, whom she had always held in high regard. So when he told her that the apparitions were the work of the devil, a temptation to lure her beloved child to hell, Maria Rosa was terrified. This child whose conscience she had worked so hard to form was being tempted to lie? No, no, she would not have it. She became angry, wanting only for Lúcia to tell the truth. She begged, threatened, and pleaded at turns, and did everything she could to make her child be honest.

Eventually, the apparitions of Fátima gained so much worldwide attention that Lúcia was not able to live a normal life in her childhood home. For reasons both selfless and selfish, the Church authorities and the local bishop wanted her removed from the area. I'm sure that a concern for the child's safety was indeed a motivating factor, but it is also certain that Church authorities, still investigating the veracity of the apparitions, wanted to ensure Lúcia's silence on the subject.

The bishop offered safety for silence.<sup>7</sup>

And so Lúcia, the beloved daughter of a mother very much still alive, was sent to an orphanage.<sup>8</sup> She lived under an assumed name and was told never to speak of her family, her past, or what

---

7. While Maria Rosa assented to this separation as what was best for her child, it's worth asking how free she was to refuse it. Women in 1920s Portugal, even those as educated as Maria Rosa, were limited in their rights. They wouldn't earn the right to vote until 1931 and wouldn't achieve full equality under the law until 1976.

8. The school Lúcia was sent to is often referred to as a boarding school, and while it was that, it was a boarding school for children without family, hence my use of the term orphanage.