

A Network of Miracles: Our History

When Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN) was launched on Aug. 15, 1981, many felt there would be little demand for a Catholic network.

In fact, when Mother M. Angelica, a cloistered nun, fulfilled a promise to our Lord in the early 1960s by founding Our Lady of Angels Monastery in Irondale, Ala., she had no idea she would one day found the largest religious media network in the world.

Who could have imagined that a cloistered nun would found a global television network? Who could have predicted that a network funded entirely by donations from “people in the pews” instead of advertising would become the largest religious media network in the world? Yet that is the story behind the EWTN Global Catholic Network.

The future Mother Angelica, foundress of EWTN, was born on April 20, 1923 in southeast Canton, Ohio to Mae Gianfrancesco Rizzo and John Rizzo. The couple named their daughter Rita Antoinette Rizzo.

Realistically, no one could have expected the child to amount to much. Her parents were not religious. In fact, when Rita was only 7-years-old, her abused mother filed for divorce, which was quite a stigma in those days. Rita was so poor and her mother so mentally fragile that the child had to go to school and run her mother’s dry cleaning business at the same time. As a result, she was distrustful of outsiders, never made friends and never dated.

But Rita experienced two miracles in her pre-convent days, which changed her life. The first occurred in 1934. The 11-year-old adolescent went running for a bus – and missed seeing an oncoming car. When she finally saw the car, she froze. However, “two hands” pick her up and placed her on the median. The bus driver would later say he had never seen anyone jump so high.

Her second miracle occurred in 1942. For years, the teenager suffered from ptosis of the stomach, which made her hands shake, her left arm go numb, and her stomach spasm, which made it hard to eat or sleep. But after a visit with Mystic Rhonda Wise, Rita experienced a miraculous healing. That healing made her realize that God loved her personally – and she began to love Him back. Her love became such that on Aug. 15, 1944, she entered a Cleveland convent and became Sister Mary Angelica of the Annunciation, a Franciscan Nun of the Most Blessed Sacrament. The order would later change its name to the Poor Clares of Perpetual Adoration.

Sister’s brash personality and poor health – including pneumonia, a tonsillectomy and water on the knees – made it unlikely that she would remain a nun. But an overnight healing of her knees convinced the order that the young nun had a vocation. Sister Angelica made her final vows on Jan. 2, 1953.

But making vows didn’t cure Sister of her ailments. She fell and injured her back while washing the floor and nothing, including a body cast, leg and neck traction and a back brace, cured it. However, just before a risky operation on her back, Sister made

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God a life-changing promise. She told Him she would start a monastery in the South if He would allow her to walk again and, although the July 31, 1956 surgery was a medical failure, Sister found she could indeed walk.

To make good on that promise, Sister wrote a letter to Archbishop Toolen, bishop of the Diocese of Mobile-Birmingham, in Jan. 1975 asking if he would allow her to build a cloistered community in his diocese. Archbishop Toolen said yes, and the seeds of an apostolate -- the likes of which the world had never seen -- were planted.

Of course, Our Lady of the Angels Monastery in Irondale, from which EWTN would spring, had its share of start-up problems. Despite Archbishop Toolen's "yes," Sister Angelica had to obtain approval from her bishop in Ohio as well as waivers from Rome because, at 37, she was too young to become abbess of a new monastery.

It was five long years before Rome granted Mother Angelica permission to establish an Alabama Foundation, during which time she obtained the waiver and the title "Mother." As she and a handful of nuns drove south to Birmingham in February 1961, they stopped in a roadside motel for the night and Mother saw a television set for the first time.

Once in Birmingham, a former mayor showed Mother the site on which EWTN would be built -- 15 beautiful acres of mountainside in the city of Irondale. Archbishop Toolen broke ground for the monastery on July 24, 1961. Neither he nor the nuns expected any trouble.

But trouble there was. In those days, only 2 percent of the population was Catholic, and not everyone was happy about the new monastery. The nuns were shot at, the monastery site vandalized every Saturday, and the project plagued with costly overruns. But the publicity brought the monastery and its nuns to the attention of the general population, which eventually embraced it.

The new monastery was dedicated on May 20, 1962, and Mother immediately began giving speeches in its parlor. She even did a television interview in Sept. 1967 to explain how the Second Vatican Council was changing things in the monastery. Meanwhile, the sisters sold fishing lures and roasted peanuts to support themselves, but they implored God to send them work that would help them be part of the mission of the Church.

In 1969, Rome gave Mother permission to continue her parlor talks as a missionary activity. The talks were taped and sold.

By 1971, Bishop Joseph Vath, the first bishop of the new Diocese of Birmingham, began encouraging Mother to accept invitations to speak to Catholic groups outside the cloister.

In the ensuing decade, Mother would record a radio program, and publish mini-books on the Faith. Her books would eventually be printed on her own printing press, and,

along with her tapes, distributed throughout the country by a group of dedicated lay people.

But it wasn't until Mother visited a Baptist-run television station atop a Chicago skyscraper in March 1978 that she turned her attention to a new medium: television. It was then that she famously declared: "Lord, I gotta have one of these."

Never one to do things by halves, Mother's first foray into television was a 60-part series for the Christian Broadcast Network, filmed from May to August 1978.

However, in November 1978, Mother discovered that the station where she was filming her second series planned to air a blasphemous movie. She threatened to pull out. The station manager told that her television work would end without his facilities. Mother told him she'd build her own studio. The station manager said she couldn't do it. Mother said: "You just watch me!"

Armed with \$200 and 12 cloistered nuns with no television experience, Mother proceeded to turn the monastery garage into a television studio. EWTN received its FCC license on Jan. 27, 1981, making it the first Catholic satellite television station in the United States. A few months later, on Aug. 15, 1981, EWTN began broadcasting four hours a day to 60,000 homes.

Mother would go millions of dollars into debt over the course of building the Network, which has always been funded by viewer contributions – no advertising!

Few would have been willing to risk so much. But Mother said: "You want to do something for the Lord ... do it. Whatever you feel needs to be done, even though you're shaking in your boots, you're scared to death – take the first step forward. The grace comes with that one step and you get the grace as you step. Being afraid is not a problem; it's doing nothing when you're afraid."

Mother was no stranger to fear – but she kept moving and, through the grace of God, the Network grew and the debt was paid.

From the original four hours of broadcasting a day to 24 hours a day; from pre-taped programs only to live programs in the U.S. and around the world; from one feed in English to eight feeds in English, Spanish, German and French; from television to radio, to shortwave, to the Internet (not to mention EWTN Religious Catalogue); from 60,000 homes to more than 150 million homes – the Network continues to grow. And all because one cloistered nun said "yes" to Jesus.

The complete story can be found in EWTN News Director Raymond Arroyo's bestselling book, "Mother Angelica: The Remarkable Story of a Nun, Her Nerve, and a Network of Miracles." Click here to purchase from EWTN Religious Catalogue.