

Mother Angelica The Early Years

April 20, 1923

Rita Antoinette Rizzo, the future Mother Angelica, is born in southeast Canton, Ohio, a ghetto ruled by the Sicilian-based Black Hand. Her parents are John Rizzo, an abusive husband and unemployed tailor who wanted to remain childless, and the mentally fragile Mae Gianfrancesco Rizzo.

November 1928

John Rizzo leaves his family, forcing little Rita and her mother to live with her grandparents, Anthony and Mary Gianfrancesco. Because there are only two bedrooms and her four brothers also live in the house, mother and daughter occupy a renovated attic. Anthony runs a family-oriented saloon, a center of immigrant activity from which Rita learns about prostitutes, the mob, holy Italian women and ethnic diversity.

Late 1920s

Although her parents aren't religious, Mae joins St. Anthony's church, where she organizes Italian festivals. In 1927, Rita gets on stage for the first time, doing an impersonation of Al Jolson singing "Danny Boy."

March 10, 1929

Father Joseph Riccardi, pastor of St. Anthony's church, is gunned down for moving St. Anthony's church away from the dealers (who buried drugs on school grounds) to a better part of southeast Canton. This is a big blow to Rita and Mae.

October 1929.

After Rita's experience of the Great Depression, she will never deposit her money in a bank.

Sept. 24, 1930

John Rizzo returns to his family, but Mae files for divorce citing "extreme cruelty." One of Rita's cousins later says that Rita "never had a childhood."

March 10, 1931

Mae is awarded custody of Rita. John rarely makes child-support payments, leaving mother and daughter to suffer from poverty and the stigma of divorce.

1933 to 1937

Mae opens a dry-cleaning business, and disagreements with her brothers force mother and daughter to move to a series of rat-infested one-bedroom apartments, from which they both work and live. When Rita has disagreements with her mother, she sometimes lives with family friends or Victoria Addams, a woman her father is dating.

1933

Her home life and the cruelty of the nuns at St. Anthony's compel Mae to send Rita to public school. Although a priest later persuades Mae to re-enroll her child, another incident of cruelty and Mae's treatment by a missionary during confession – because of the stigma of the divorce – result in Mother and child leaving the Church for a decade.

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1934

Poverty and depression push Mae over the edge. Because her mother is always crying and threatening suicide, 11-year-old Rita becomes the parent, delivering dry cleaning to customers in a car and collecting payments.

1934

Rita's first miraculous experience: In running to catch a bus, Rita misses a car speeding toward her. When she sees it, she freezes. Rita feels two hands pick her up and put her on the median in the center of the street. The bus driver says he has never seen anyone jump so high before.

1937

Rita, 14, returns, with her mother, to live with her grandparents. She attends McKinley High School, where teachers conspire to help the unhappy teen.

Summer 1939

Rita becomes a majorette. But Rita's childhood leaves her distrustful of outsiders. She never makes friends and never dates. Her mother, in the midst of her first nervous breakdown, goes to live with her sister Rose in Philadelphia. Rita goes to classes and makes money teaching baton-twirling and working at a factory making liturgical candles, but she is miserable and in deep pain.

December 1940

Rita's physical troubles, which will eventually be diagnosed as ptosis of the stomach (or "dropped stomach"), begin. The illness makes her hands shake, her left arm go numb and her stomach spasm, which make it hard to sleep or eat.

1942

The Japanese attack Pearl Harbor in December 1941, and Rita soon lands a job as secretary to the vice president of advertising at Timken Roller Bearing Company. She writes and edits copy, organizes layouts for ad campaigns, and learns how to operate machinery.

1942

After a visit with Mystic Rhonda Wise, Rita receives a miraculous healing from her recurring stomach ailment. The experience changes her life. She realizes that God loves her personally – and she begins to love Him back.

Fall 1943

After completing the Way of the Cross at St. Anthony's, facing a statue of Our Lady of Sorrows, Rita suddenly realizes she has a vocation, which she needs to keep a secret from her mentally unstable mother. Rita seeks out Rhonda Wise's spiritual director, Msgr. Habig, and begins to visit Wise more frequently. Wise gives her a list of communities to contact, but Rita's grades are so poor, she has a hard time finding a community that will accept her.

August 15, 1944

Ritz Rizzo enters the convent in Cleveland, Ohio and becomes Sister Mary Angelica of the Annunciation, a Franciscan Nun of the Most Blessed Sacrament. The order later changes its name to Poor Clares of Perpetual Adoration.



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