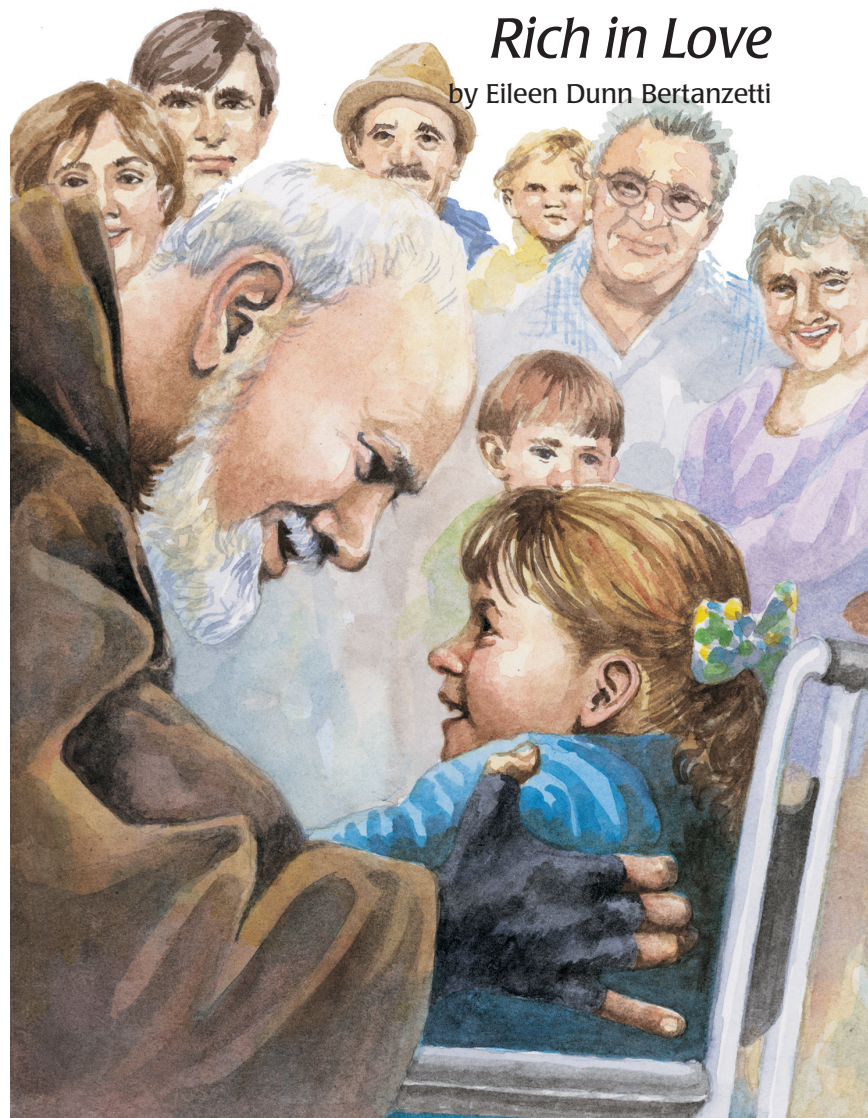


# Saint Pio of Pietrelcina

*Rich in Love*

by Eileen Dunn Bertanzetti



*Saint Pio of Pietrelcina*  
*Rich in Love*

*Written by*  
*Eileen Dunn Bertanzetti*

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*Karen Ritz*

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## TO LIVE OR DIE

Francesco Forgione squeezed his eyes shut and cringed. The thirteen-year-old wished his mother hadn't caught him kneeling on the stone floor beside his bed.

"Get up off that cold floor," she insisted. "You've already had enough sickness for ten children."

"But, Mama," Francesco (Fran-CHESS-ko) pleaded, "so many people need my prayers."

Mrs. Forgione (FOR-gee-OH-nay) knew her son was right. She smiled as she rested her work-roughened hands on his shoulders. "Ask your guardian angel to do some of that praying for you," she suggested, "so you can take care of yourself, too."

Francesco grinned. Ever since he had been old enough to understand, his mother had taught him about God and the angels. They are always with you, he remembered Mama saying, so never be afraid.

The year was 1900, and like other young people throughout Italy, Francesco witnessed the daily suffering of great numbers of the



poor and homeless. Especially in the southern part of the country where the Forgiones lived, many families didn't have enough money to buy essentials, like shoes. Some people were even forced to live in caves or in small windowless houses with their donkeys and goats.

Just before Francesco was born on May 25, 1887, his parents Orazio (Or-AH-zio) and Giuseppa (Ju-SEH-pa) begged God and the angels to help them. Two of their babies had previously died, and only little Michael was left. Mrs. Forgione felt fear closing in on her as she was about to give birth to her fourth child. "Please, Lord," she pleaded, "let this baby live!"

Soon after, Mr. and Mrs. Forgiones' shouts of thanks rose up with the cry of their newborn son. The happy parents named him Francesco, after Saint Francis of Assisi.

The next morning, while fruit trees opened their blossoms to greet the sun, Mr. Forgione bundled up the tiny, black-haired infant. Orazio tenderly carried his son to the church to be baptized. Over cobblestone lanes, past children playing in the narrow streets and laundry waving in the breeze, Orazio strode. All the way to the church, he wondered, *Will our little Francesco survive?*

## A HARD LIFE

Life in the Forgiones' village of Pietrelcina (Pea-EH-trell-CHEE-na) wasn't easy. The barren soil often refused to provide enough food for its people. Many of Orazio's neighbors existed on bread, spaghetti, olive oil, and a few vegetables. Meat was eaten only two or three times a year. *I know some parents*, thought Orazio as he hurried to the church, *who teach their children to kiss even the smallest portion of bread before eating it.*

Today Orazio prayed, *Oh Lord, through baptism, please pour your own life and health into our frail baby.*

Swallows circling above seemed to sing, "Don't worry; Francesco will live."

And to the delight of his parents, little Francesco did.

Every evening, sunburned and exhausted, Mr. and Mrs. Forgione hiked the two rocky miles home after working all day in their small field. Their faithful donkey plodded beside them, carrying the farm tools on his back. The rickety wagon it pulled jostled tiny Francesco

and his older brother, Michael. It was always a very bumpy ride because many of the roads in the area were stony creek beds.

One afternoon, along the rough path toward home, Orazio and Giuseppa stopped at the church. "Let's go inside and thank our loving God for our greatest treasure—our children," said Orazio to his wife.

Later that night, the only light in the small Forgione house danced from an oil lamp. Giuseppa wrapped Francesco in a soft blanket and laid him on an old, lumpy mattress to sleep. "Dear God," she whispered, "I wish we could afford a soft bed for him." Then she reminded herself, *Our family already has everything we need: the love of God and each other.*

By Francesco's fifth birthday, his parents had taught him simple prayers including the Our Father and Hail Mary. One of Francesco's favorite prayers was to his guardian angel: "Angel of God, my guardian dear, to whom God's love commits me here, ever this day be at my side, to light and guard, to rule and guide." And despite the fevers that sometimes afflicted Francesco, he found joy in knowing that his angel accompanied him wherever he went.

Once Francesco told a lonely person, "Don't forget your guardian angel. He never

leaves you and is always there to help you. He's so dear and so good." And about our Blessed Mother, Francesco said, "I wish I had a voice loud enough to tell the whole world about her."

With every year that passed, Francesco realized more and more how much the people of southern Italy suffered in their poverty. *I want to help them*, he thought, *but I don't know how*. He had enough to do just helping his parents work hard to provide for their growing family and to assist their neighbors.

If sickness forced one of the village mothers to stay in bed, Mrs. Forgione would do the wash and hang the woman's laundry out to dry. Mr. Forgione would always help an injured or ailing neighbor to plow his field. Francesco noticed the love and generosity with which his parents did their good works. *Oh, Lord Jesus*, he prayed, *please help me to grow up and be just like Papa and Mama*.

By the time he turned eight, dark-haired Francesco had learned that not everyone practiced kindness the way his family did. One day he met three older boys on the narrow lane that ran beside his house. "Hey, Forgione!" one called. "Come with us, if you want to have some fun!"

Francesco didn't know what to do. He'd heard these boys swear and had seen them throw stones at younger children.

Francesco took in a deep breath. "No," he said firmly.

The oldest boy now blocked his path. "What's the matter?" he snarled, shoving Francesco. "You too good for the rest of us?"

Tears threatened to spill from Francesco's eyes, but he held his ground. He marched away in silence, promising God, *I will try never to hurt anyone, Lord.*

Francesco decided to pray more. Perhaps his prayers would help stop people—including those three older boys—from hurting others. Besides praying alone and at church, Francesco prayed the rosary every night with his family, which now included five children. Sometimes as his mother cooked her family's breakfast in the open fireplace, she'd take a few minutes to see if Francesco had risen and dressed. Often she'd find him gazing out one of the tiny windows, whispering his prayers.

During the day while other children of Pietrelcina played outside, Francesco would sometimes stay inside and pray. Even when fierce winds whipped and whistled around the house, and the only source of heat was the fireplace, he knelt on the cold stone floor.

## TEND SHEEP?

Late one afternoon, Mrs. Forgione spied Francesco once again kneeling in prayer. She shook her head and frowned. *What will become of this serious son of mine?* she wondered, as she returned to the pot of stew simmering over the fire. She didn't realize that through prayer young Francesco found peace and joy.

One night, Mr. Forgione rested in a chair by the crude kitchen table. The yellow glow of the oil lamp silhouetted his lean frame. He was worried about his youngest son. *How will a gentle and sensitive boy like Francesco ever survive in this rough world?* He turned the question over in his mind.

But Francesco never wanted his parents to worry about him. They had always told him, "God and your guardian angel will take care of you." Francesco knew his parents were right.

Francesco tried to honor God by staying out of trouble. The boy also wanted to set a good example for others. But in spite of his good intentions, trouble seemed to plunge into his life.

Toward the end of one late-summer day, Francesco's father, mother, older brother, and three younger sisters were all working in the fields. Though he wanted to help them, nine-year-old Francesco was confined to bed with a fever. The burning summer heat only added to his misery. Without medicine, his thin body had to fight the illness alone.

While fever raged within him, Francesco worried that it would keep him from starting school on time. *I want to study in order to become a priest*, he thought. *I don't want anything to stop me from doing that*. Even when other children had made fun of him because he refused to join in their mischief, God had always comforted Francesco. The boy wanted to spend the rest of his life serving his loving Creator.

Now hunger added its pangs to Francesco's feverish body. He remembered the plate of stuffed, spicy-hot peppers his mother had fried over the open fire that morning. He had watched her store the steaming peppers in the wooden cabinet by the fireplace. The aroma of the peppers, mingled with the scent of the fire's dying embers, now filled his room. He eased himself out of bed.

Trying to ignore his dizziness, Francesco stumbled barefoot across the cobbled floor

and over to the cabinet. *It can't hurt to just take a peek at them*, he told himself. He opened the cabinet door and inhaled the delicious smell. Silencing his grumbling conscience, he grabbed the plate of peppers. After Francesco had gobbled down every last fiery morsel, he trekked back to bed.

Within fifteen minutes, his stomach burned as if he'd swallowed hot coals. But the guilt that flamed inside his conscience was even more painful than the fire in his stomach.

Later that day when Mrs. Forgione discovered the empty plate, Francesco knew he had some confessing to do.

"All the peppers are gone!" his mother exclaimed in dismay.

*How can I admit that I stuffed myself with the food meant for our family's meal tonight?* thought Francesco.

Suddenly he realized his fever and pain had vanished. He decided that the heat of the peppers must have melted away his sickness. And now his wish to begin the new school year on time could come true! With that happy thought, Francesco admitted, "I ate all your peppers, Mama." He bowed his head in shame. "I'm really sorry!"

"It's all right. I forgive you," Mrs. Forgione quietly answered, kissing the top of his head.



Francesco looked up at her, trying hard not to grin. "But I must confess something else, Mama; part of me is not sorry I ate all the peppers."

She squinted at him. "What do you mean?"

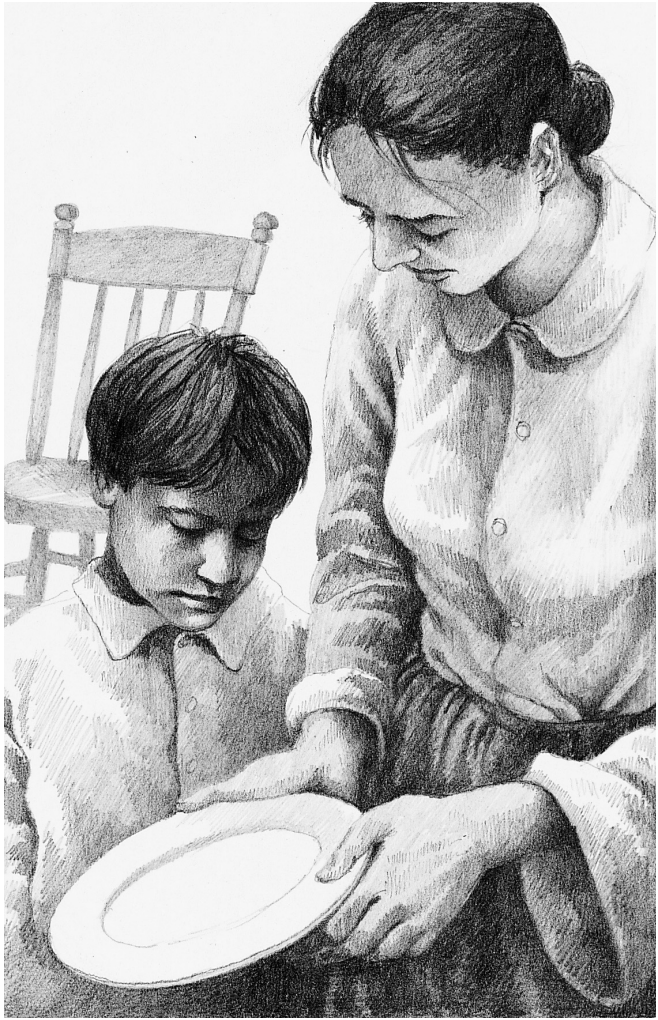
"The peppers cured me, Mama. Now I can go to school!"

"Thanks be to God," said Mrs. Forgione, smiling as she hugged her son.

When Mr. Forgione returned home that night, Francesco broke the good news to him. "The fever is gone, Papa. Now I can start school."

But no smile creased his father's sunburned face. "Francesco," he sighed, "the Lord has blessed our family with the five of you children. I thank him for you every day." The farmer looked down at the floor. "But with seven mouths to feed, we don't have the money to send you to school. I need you to help tend our sheep."

*Sheep?* Francesco's shoulders sagged in disappointment. *If God wants me to become a priest, why does he let so many things get in my way? Why?*



*"I ate all your peppers, Mama.  
I'm really sorry!"*