

Padre Pio

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PADRE PIO

A HOLY PRIEST

by
Jim Gallagher

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INTRODUCTION

On 1st November, the Feast of All Saints, 1995, Consiglia de Martino dropped her daughter off at school in Salerno and was on her way to Mass.

She felt increasingly ill and before she could even make it to church, stopped at her sister's house. She felt a painful swelling in her neck and when she looked in the mirror saw that it was the size of a grapefruit. Consiglia and her sister became quite frightened. They phoned their husbands to come with them to the hospital.

As soon as a doctor had examined the 43 year-old mother of three, he sent her to the emergency room. A CAT-scan revealed a liquid deposit on the left side of her neck. After a second scan the doctors came up with the diagnosis: a diffuse lymphatic spilling of approximately two litres caused by a rupture of the lymphatic canals. Surgical intervention was advised.

Consiglia and her family were devotees of Padre Pio and she was a member of a Padre Pio prayer group. At the hospital she used her mobile phone to call a Capuchin brother at the friary where Padre Pio had lived in San Giovanni Rotondo. Consiglia was used to making a monthly pilgrimage there to pray at the Padre's tomb.

Consiglia's husband and daughter also called the friar, who later testified that he did in fact go to the Padre's

tomb and ask him to intercede for Consiglia.

The next day there was reduction of the fluid deposit in her neck and Consiglia noticed a great decrease in the pain she had been suffering. Examination on the 3rd November showed that the swelling in her neck was almost all gone. An X-ray and examination showed no more evidence of unusual liquid in the system. On 6th November another CAT-scan confirmed the complete disappearance of the liquid deposits.

Consiglia was discharged with a clean bill of health. Subsequent examinations showed no after-effects of the illness.

An investigation at diocesan level lasted almost one year. In September 1997 it was passed to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, in Rome. A further panel of medical experts unanimously announced the following year the “extraordinary and scientifically inexplicable” nature of Consiglia’s cure.

In 1998 at the Vatican the Special Congress of Theologians met to discuss the theological aspects of the healing and later that year the Ordinary Session of Cardinals and Bishops met to discuss the case. On 21st December 1998, in the presence of Pope John Paul II, the Congregation for the Causes of Saints published the decree accepting Consiglia’s healing as a miracle attributed to Padre Pio’s intercession.

Consiglia was present in St Peter’s Square when Pope

John Paul II declared Padre Pio of Pietrelcina Blessed on Sunday 2nd May 1999.

Countless people have tales to tell of the power of the Italian priest's prayers. The Vice-Postulator of the Cause for Padre Pio's Canonisation, Father Gerardo Di Flumeri, presented another healing to the appropriate authorities to consider.

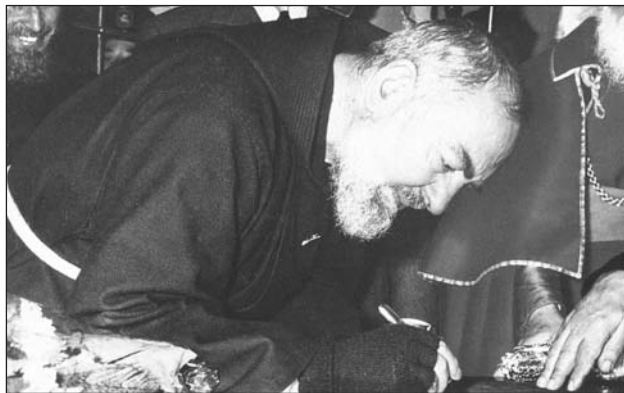
He says, "In the month of February 2000, in the hospital 'The Home for the Relief of Suffering' in San Giovanni Rotondo, a boy of eight years of age was cured from Meningitis Meningococica with CID. The cure which was extraordinary was attributed to the intercession of Blessed Padre Pio who was invoked in prayer by the boy's parents."

After all the appropriate enquiries and procedures at diocesan and Vatican level, the Holy Father announced on 26th February 2002 that he would Canonise Padre Pio on 16th June 2002.

In an age of multi-national business and the culture of 'enterprise' and 'success', in a time of instant satellite communication, 24-hour entertainment, space travel and new inventions, why do increasing numbers of people throughout the world, particularly young people, exhibit a fascination with and admiration for a Franciscan friar from a little village who lived and died in a remote mountain-top friary in southern Italy?

Padre Pio lived the Catholic priesthood day in and day out for over fifty years in a small Franciscan friary at San

Giovanni Rotondo in southern Italy. His daily agenda was the Divine Office, the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, community life with his brethren and the priestly ministry of Confession. Hour after hour, day after day he spent cooped up in the confessional. And, from near and far, the people flocked to him.



Padre Pio writing, his pierced hands covered by fingerless mittens.

EARLY LIFE

The man who became Padre Pio was born on 25th May 1887 the fourth of eight children to Giuseppa de Nunzio and Grazio Forgione, a peasant couple living in the village of Pietrelcina, about six kilometres from the city of Benevento in southern Italy. He was baptised Francesco, and would be known to his family and friends as ‘Franci’.

The family farmed a little land, reckoned to total about five acres, over two or three small fields. They lived in a small stone house in the village and would walk from there to the fields to tend their crops and a few livestock. They were simple peasant farming folk, and people of strong faith. In later life Padre Pio would remark on the goodness of such simple people and lament with tears in his eyes that we would never see their likes again.

Franci’s early life was outwardly normal, no signs of anything extraordinary or miraculous. His childhood friends recalled that he played with them and was like them - except that he would never use bad language and, as he had been taught, fled the company if such ever arose. One friend, Luigi Orlando, later recalled that as boys they used to play together and look after their families’ sheep in the fields on top of a hill called Piana Romana outside the village. They would have typical boyhood contests of strength. “Francesco nearly always beat me because he was

bigger than me. Once, while we were wrestling, we fell and he pinned my shoulders to the ground. In the attempt to turn him and thus reverse the situation, all my efforts were in vain, and so a strong expression escaped my lips. Franci's reaction was immediate; he disengaged himself, got up and ran away all at once because he never, ever said bad words and he didn't want to hear them either."

When he was almost nine years old, in the spring of 1896, his mother took Franci to visit a relative in hospital in Benevento. After the visit Giuseppa took Franci through the wards to visit other patients, stopping here and there for a kindly word, and sometimes a prayer. They stopped at the bed of a young man, a wounded soldier returned from Ethiopia, who was being attended by a nurse and a priest. Franci later remembered that the man "suddenly bowed his head; he remained stock still; and after a few minutes, he died."

Vocation

In August of that year Franci's maternal grandfather died. Later that same year, after hearing an inspiring sermon in church, he told his parents he wanted to be a priest. A year later, in the autumn of 1897, Franci met Brother Camillus from the Capuchin friary at Marcone, who had come to visit Pietrelcina. As he made his way through the village, the friar distributed medals, holy pictures and chestnuts to the children who gathered around him. They

were all struck by his cheerfulness and Franci was impressed by his long black bushy beard!

Franci decided there and then that he wanted to be a Capuchin. When his parents said that they would much prefer that he become a secular parish priest, he insisted, "I want to be a friar with a beard"!

Educational opportunities at that time in that place were extremely limited. Franci would need to reach a certain standard before he would ever be accepted for either junior seminary or novitiate. His parents promised him they would find the money to pay for his education and Grazio went abroad, first to Brazil and then to the United States, to work and send money home. Franci's elder brother Michele would eventually join their father to work in America.

At the age of eleven, as was customary - it was the time before Pope St. Pius X lowered the age for children's first Holy Communion - Franci made his first Confession and received his first Holy Communion. Later that same year of 1899 he was confirmed by the Bishop of Benevento in the parish church at Pietrelcina.

While his father worked abroad, his mother oversaw her son's education at home, enrolling him in a private school run in the village. By the age of thirteen his primary education was completed. Giuseppa then found a teacher who taught in the State schools of the region and ran his own private classes in the evening. Thus Franci received two years of secondary education.

A rich interior life

It is recorded that Franci attended Mass every morning, often acting as altar server. The parish priest, Don Pannullo, remained a life-long friend.

While Franci lived a normal, outward, everyday life like everyone else in the village, only later did it become apparent that he had a very rich interior life and intimacy with Our Lord. Much later, Father Agostino, who became his confessor in religious life, wrote in his diary: “The apparitions and ecstasies began at the age of five when he first had the idea of consecrating himself forever to the Lord, and they were continuous. When asked why he had kept them hidden for so long (until 1915), he candidly replied that he had not disclosed them as he believed they were ordinary things which happened to all souls. In fact, one day he naively said, ‘Don’t you see Our Lady?’ To my negative reply he added, ‘You only say that out of holy humility.’

But with consolations there also came a spiritual battle, one which Franci Forgione would fight for the rest of his life. For Fr Agostino continued in his diary, “At the age of five the diabolical apparitions began also, and for almost twenty years they were always in the most obscene forms; human and above all bestial.”

In the summer of 1902, now aged 15 and having completed his basic secondary education, Franci was able to apply for admission to the Capuchin Order. Sometime that autumn a letter arrived from the Capuchin Father

Provincial saying that he would be accepted into the Order and giving him a date to arrive at the friary of Morcone.

Spiritual battle

It was while he was making final preparations for entry into religious life that Franci had a vision which would reveal to him the mission of spiritual battle which would be the mark of his religious life and his priesthood.

From his own words, from notes written under obedience later in religious life, we have a picture of what the young Franci saw. While he was eager to embrace the penitential life of a Capuchin friar, he was also dreading the day he would have to bid farewell to his beloved mother and other relatives. He was “meditating on his vocation” and wondering how he could steel himself for the new life which lay ahead, above all the departure from his beloved family and Pietrelcina.

“My senses were suddenly suspended and I was made to gaze with the eyes of my intellect on things quite different from those seen by bodily eyes.” What he saw was a radiant and majestic figure standing next to him. The man took Franci by the hand and said, “Come with me, for it is fitting that you fight as a valiant warrior.” The figure led him to a vast plain where he saw two enormous crowds of people. On the one side they were beautiful and dressed in snow-white, on the other they were all in black and of hideous appearance. These two

crowds were separated by a wide gulf into which Franci saw himself placed by his guide.

Suddenly a giant man appeared, “so tall that his forehead touched the clouds, while his countenance was that of a hideous monster.”

Franci felt himself go weak and thought he would pass out at the sight. The figure started to advance towards him, while his guide explained that Franci would have to fight this monster. As his knees started to buckle, he begged his guide not to have to fight the ogre. The words the guide replied must have struck into Franci’s soul for in his note years later, he puts them in inverted commas, quoting directly: “All resistance is useless; it is advisable that you fight this man. Take heart; enter confidently into the combat, go forward courageously, for I shall be close to you. I will assist you and will not allow him to overcome you. In reward for your victory over him, I shall give you a splendid crown to adorn your head.”

These words are the key to the whole of the rest of Francesco Forgione’s life. He would end up living in a mountain-top friary in the vicinity of an ancient place of pilgrimage to St Michael the Archangel. As Padre Pio he would, as St Paul instructed us, “fight the good fight” to the end (cf Ephesians 6:10-13). While, as the Church assures us, he is now bathed in the glory of the elect in Heaven, when on earth he shared the sufferings of Our Lord. Many were

the people who even saw him suffer from an apparent crown of thorns while he offered the holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

Understandably frightened by the experience but also reassured (the radiant guide had assured him: “Don’t be afraid of his attacks or his dreadful aspect. Remember what I have promised you; that I’ll always be close to you and help you so that you’ll always succeed in overcoming him.”) Franci’s resolve to enter religious life was strengthened and from that moment never wavered.

Entry to the Friary

Entry to the friary at Morcone was set for 6th January 1903. On New Year’s Day, after receiving Holy Communion at Mass, Franci understood that in the vision he had had, the two groups represented the demons and the angels and that the guide was “Jesus Christ Himself” who would always be at his side to assist him in this fight provided he “placed his trust in Him alone and fought generously.”

Franci Forgione, later Padre Pio, fought generously to the very end.

While his resolve to quit the world and enter the service of Our Lord in religious life was clear, strong and unambiguous, Franci remained - and would do so throughout his life - extremely affectionate and tender-hearted. His leave-taking of his mother and family (his father still being at work in America) was heartbreaking. While the grief of his departure from loved ones made

him feel “that his very bones were being crushed”, as the horse and cart arrived to take him and two other boys from the village off to the friary at Morcone, Franci - for the sake of his mother and the others - managed to “shed not a single tear at this painful leave-taking.”

On his arrival at the Capuchin novitiate at Morcone, Franci was delighted when the door was opened by Brother Camillus, the friar who had first attracted him to the Franciscan life. The big burly brother threw his arms around the boy, “Bravo Franci, bravo. You’ve been faithful to the calling and promise of St Francis. Bravo, Franci!”

After a welcome and allocation to their individual cells, the aspirants to religious life embarked on a silent retreat. On 22nd January they were clothed with the religious habit and Franci Forgione become Brother Pio. As Italians celebrate their Name Day more so than their birthday, in later life Padre Pio observed 5th May as his Name Day. That is the feast of Pope St Pius V, sometimes known as ‘the Rosary Pope’. It was he who had ordered that the Rosary be said which resulted in the victory of the Papal forces over the Turks in the Battle of Lepanto in 1576.

Franciscan Life

The regime of the Capuchins was an austere one. The day began at midnight with the recitation in the chapel of the offices of Matins and Lauds. The friars would return to their cells for a short sleep before rising again for

community prayers at five am. Thus the day proceeded; offices in choir, Holy Mass, manual work and study. The main meal was at mid-day.

While Padre Pio threw himself into the discipline of the Capuchin life, and loved the study of Sacred Scripture, the Franciscan Rule, the mystical theology of St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross, he was never glum or downcast. At the appointed times of community recreation when the normal Rule of Silence was lifted, he loved to laugh and joke with his fellow novices. When, once as a Capuchin student, he was sent home for a short while due to sickness, his brethren sorely missed his presence and company in the friary. They later remembered how joyful they felt upon his return.

In the autumn of that year of his novitiate, 1903, Brother Pio's father, Grazio, came home on a visit from the United States. He was shocked at the gaunt appearance of his son and the toll that the rigorous penitential life seemed to be taking on him. Brother Pio never complained.

On 22nd January 1904 the 16 year-old novice made his first vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. There then began a six-year period of training and preparation for ordination to the priesthood (although in the event, Pio would be ordained early by special dispensation). Throughout this period, the students spent time at different houses of the Capuchin province, according to where their teachers of different specialities were based.

San Giovanni Rotondo

Once, during their period of theological studies, at the friary of San Marco la Catola, probably in 1907, the students were discussing the different friaries of the province. One wondered whether the old friary at San Giovanni Rotondo, would ever be re-opened. It had been founded as one of the first Capuchin friaries, just twelve years after Pope Clement VIII had given the Bull for the reform of the Franciscans in 1528. It had, however, been closed since the dissolution of religious orders in Italy in 1866.

One brother remarked that if it ever re-opened he would like to be posted there, with its ideal setting in the Gargano Mountains, the pure air, the remoteness and poverty of the region. The students began jokingly vying with each other as to who should be posted there. They were silenced when Brother Pio coolly and calmly stated that yes, that friary would one day be re-opened but it was he who would be posted there. He said it with such cool conviction that the others were somewhat stunned and moved the conversation on to another topic!

In 1904 when the Father General of the Order had visited the Foggia province, Brother Pio had volunteered to be sent on the foreign missions after his ordination. Because he was already not in the best of health, Fr General turned down this request. As it would turn out, Father Pio would conduct the most

intense priestly mission from a remote mountain friary and people from all over the world would flock to be near this man of God.

Bilocation

A mystical phenomenon which would come to be associated with Padre Pio made its first appearance during his student years. Throughout his adult life there would be numerous testimonies from people saying they had seen Padre Pio in different places when, in fact, it was known and witnessed that he was still present in his friary. It is a phenomenon known as bilocation, being present in two places at the same time.

In his religious life as a Capuchin and as a priest, it is said that Padre Pio experienced all the gifts of the Holy Spirit. So united was he with the Heart of our Redeemer and - after the example of Our Lady, Spouse of the Paraclete - so open was he to the workings of the Holy Spirit in him that he appeared to exercise all the charisms of that same Spirit.

In a signed deposition, Brother Pio himself described how on 18th January 1905, while physically present in the friary chapel, along with another brother, he 'suddenly found himself' in a house far away where a man was dying and a little girl was being born to his wife. Our Lady appeared to Pio and told him she was entrusting this little girl to his spiritual care. Eighteen years later, that girl, Giovanna Rizzani, would travel to San Giovanni Rotondo

to meet the, by then, already famous Padre Pio. But, to her amazement, she would discover that it was not in fact the first time they had met! In the summer of 1922, when Giovanna was 17, she was visiting St Peter's Basilica in Rome along with a friend. She had some doubts about the Faith and wanted to speak to a priest. She went to a friar sitting in one of the many confessionals in the basilica and very clearly and simply he resolved her questions.

A year later Giovanna heard about Padre Pio and decided to visit San Giovanni Rotondo. Out of all the people waiting to greet him and kiss his hand, Padre Pio immediately singled out Giovanna and walked straight up to her. "I know you," he said. "You were born the night your father died." Giovanna didn't know how the young priest could know this about her.

The next day she went to Confession to him. Pio said to her, "My child, I have waited all these years for you."

Giovanna thought he must be confusing her with someone else and said as much. Pio asked her, "Don't you remember looking for a confessor in St Peter's?" He told her he had gone there in bilocation to hear her confession that day!

Giovanna became a spiritual daughter of Padre Pio and would have an extraordinary experience upon his death 45 years later.

Throughout his life, there came to be many tales of Padre Pio bilocating. Blessed Don Orione told how he

saw Padre Pio present in St Peter's Basilica at the Canonisation of Don Bosco in 1934. A bishop said he had seen him present at the Canonisation of St Therese of Lisieux in 1925. All this despite the fact that from the moment of his posting to San Giovanni Rotondo in 1918, Padre Pio never left there. Indeed, he only ever left the friary on a handful of occasions, such as to cast his vote or to visit the hospital he built alongside the friary.

Illness

While continuing his studies for the priesthood, Brother Pio made his final profession as a Capuchin friar on 27th January 1907. During this period he began to experience periods when he could not retain any food. Along with this he would have a racking cough and extremely high temperatures. The community brought in a doctor who diagnosed active tuberculosis. A few months later, having been sent home to Pietrelcina to recuperate, a chest specialist in Naples diagnosed chronic bronchitis, aggravated by Pio's ascetic lifestyle.

Those three elements of his physical state would persist throughout his life. He continued to have bronchitis and also asthma. This must have caused him agonies during the stifling summer heat in the south of Italy when he spent hour after hour in the dark confined space of the confessional. Eating became a penance to him. For great periods he could eat nothing at all.

Eventually, at San Giovanni Rotondo, his superior ordered that he should attend refectory with the community at midday and eat something. Doctors testified that he existed on barely 100 calories a day. Pio once confided that the greatest gift he could receive would be dispensed from this obedience forcing him to eat something. It truly was a penance for him. There have been other cases of chosen souls who live such a degree of union with Christ, that the physical body is taken into and affected by such union. In recent times, Marthe Robin in France (died 1981) lived for 53 years consuming nothing more than the Holy Eucharist.

And there were the high temperatures. On occasion Pio could even joke about it. For if they did not use a bath thermometer to measure his temperature, the mercury would simply shoot right through the end of a normal one!

ORDINATION

During the period 1909-1916 Pio lived mostly at home in Pietrelcina. His health had broken down completely at the end of 1908 and he was unable to retain any food whatsoever. The Order gave him permission to continue his studies at home. Pio would also feel an incredible heat in his chest as if his heart were on fire and about to burst out of his chest. Again, this was not simply spiritual or metaphorical; he wrote more than once that not even plunging himself into icy cold water was enough to quench the burning heat in his heart.

He had been ordained deacon in January 1909 and it was in May of that year, that he had been given authority to continue his studies at home in Pietrelcina. He was instructed there in the rubrics of the Mass by his old friend Don Pannullo. As his health continued to deteriorate, Pio begged his superiors to allow him to be ordained as soon as possible so that he could at least die as a priest. According to Canon Law, the minimum age for ordination to the priesthood was 24. Fr Benedetto was able to inform him in July 1910 that a special dispensation had been obtained and that at the age of 23, Pio would be ordained the following month.

On the morning of 10th August 1910, he set off with Don Pannullo for Benevento. There, in the Canons'

chapel of the cathedral, he was ordained by the 83 year-old archbishop. On the 15th August he returned to Pietrelcina to sing his first public Mass for the feast of the Assumption of Our Blessed Lady into Heaven.

Pio had prepared a little memento card. It bore the words: "A souvenir of my first Mass. Jesus, my life and my breath, today I timorously raise Thee in a mystery of love. With Thee may I be for the world the way, the truth and the life, and through Thee, a holy priest, a perfect victim."

In those words the 23 year-old priest had summed up the whole theology of the Catholic priesthood. Thenceforth he would be completely identified with his Lord and Master, whose priest he was. When he administered the Sacraments of Holy Mother Church, he would act not just as a representative of Christ, but as Christ himself, "in persona Christi".

Christ was and is not only the Great High Priest, but also the Sacrificial Victim (cf Hebrews 7:27; 10:10), whose one eternal sacrifice is offered to the Father each time a priest offers the Holy Mass. Christ Priest and Victim. Padre Pio, faithful son of the Church and priest of Christ, would live to the full his vocation too as both priest and victim.

Stigmata

Less than a month after his ordination, on the afternoon of 7th September 1910, Padre Pio went to see Don Pannullo. He showed him his hands which

both had puncture marks in them. He told the parish priest that he had been praying under an elm tree at Piana Romana when Jesus and Mary appeared to him and gave him these wounds.

Don Pannullo sent him to a doctor, who diagnosed tuberculosis of the skin. Another doctor dismissed this diagnosis but could not give any other one. He did note that the wounds were about half an inch in diameter on both sides of the hands, and while they did not bleed, they seemed to go right through the hands from one side to the other.

Padre Pio's mother, Giuseppa, remembered how her son came into the house shaking his hands as if he had just burned himself. She even made a joke out of it: "What's the matter with you? You look like you're trying to play the guitar or something!" Pio said that it was nothing, just that he felt a heat in his hands. Giuseppa noticed, however, that over the next few days he tried to keep his hands hidden.

When the wounds persisted, after a few days Pio went back again to see Don Pannullo. He asked the older priest to pray with him that the Lord would take away the visible signs, although he did not mind suffering the pain of them invisibly. The two priests prayed and the wounds did disappear, although they were to reappear again briefly exactly a year later. Don Pannullo wrote an account of all this which he later sent to the Vatican.

At home in Pietrelcina

Still suffering from ill-health and the inability to retain food, Pio continued to live at home in Pietrelcina. He organised a boys' choir in the local church, the parish of St Anne. He taught religious education to the children of the area. Literacy was low in the area and Padre Pio organised and taught adult literacy classes for the workers in the fields after they had finished work.

During this time Padre Pio continued to feel a call in his soul to identify himself ever-closer to his Lord and Saviour. On the feast of St Michael the Archangel, 29th September 1910, he wrote to his spiritual director, Fr Benedetto: "This desire has been growing continually in my heart and has now become what I would call a strong passion. I have, in fact, made this offering to the Lord several times, beseeching him to pour out on me the punishments prepared for sinners and for souls in a state of purgation, even increasing them a hundredfold.... but I would now like to make this offering to the Lord in obedience to you..."

Fr Benedetto wrote back: "Make the offering of which you speak and it will be most acceptable to the Lord."

Attacks from the Devil

While we have read that even from the age of five, Pio had suffered attacks from the Devil, during this time spent at home in the early days of his priesthood, these became particularly noticeable. Pio continued his ascetic lifestyle,

sleeping on the floor with a stone block for a pillow. Sounds of chains and beatings could sometimes be heard during the night. The young priest took to sleeping (or spending the night, for it seems that just as he was no longer eating, he slept very little if at all) in a room the family had in another building known as ‘the tower’ in Pietrelcina. In summertime he would often spend the night in the hut beside the family’s fields on Piana Romana. From both of those places when Pio was there, passers-by or the curious (local children were sometimes particularly curious!) could hear eerie noises and sounds of chains, beatings and of things being thrown around.

Some years later Pio’s brother Michele wrote to him to complain that the noises of pots and pans being thrown around during the night still emanated from the tower room. Pio simply replied that Michele should have the room exorcised. He did, and the noises stopped.

We have Pio’s own words describing what used to happen in the tower or in the hut at Piano Romano. In a letter of January 1912 he wrote: “The ogre along with many of his fellows does not cease to beat me. I was about to say to death. This happens every day except on Wednesdays. But my Lord and the other noble visitors and heavenly persons make good all my losses by their frequent visits.”

In the same letter he wrote of how he was reliving the Passion of Christ, particularly “from Thursday evening until Saturday”.

Throughout the rest of his life it seems that he also suffered the Scourging of Christ on Thursday nights. It is heart-rending to see one of the Padre's nightshirts kept by the Capuchin friars; covered from top to bottom in blood from where his flesh was torn by scourges.

Suffering for the sins of priests

In 1911 his superiors were increasingly concerned about the fact that Padre Pio was still living at home in Pietrelcina; whenever he tried to return to a friary, the moment he crossed the threshold he was struck down ill. A medical examination in Naples in October 1911 produces the conclusion by the doctor that Pio was "hopelessly ill" and that he thought it didn't matter where Pio went now to live out his last days, either at home or in a friary.

Fr Benedetto, by this time having been elected Provincial, decided that if his young confrere were about to die, he would die a Capuchin in a Capuchin friary, and ordered Pio to report to the friary at Venafro, where Pio arrived on 28th October 1911.

It was due to his once again living in community that Pio's extraordinary spiritual experiences could no longer remain secret. The Father Guardian at Venafro and others often witnessed Padre Pio in ecstasy. A local doctor, Doctor Nicola Lombardi, witnessed such ecstasies of Padre Pio at least twice and carried out routine tests such as shining a light on the subject's pupils when he was in

this state. Lombardi came to consider Pio's experiences "a supernatural phenomenon" and further wrote: "I consider Padre Pio's experiences, ecstasies."

Some of these ecstasies and conversations with Our Lord concerned priests, including the second one witnessed by Dr Lombardi. In it, Padre Pio saw Jesus suffering because of the sins of priests. "How many abominations took place within Your Sanctuary! My Jesus, pardon! Punish me and not the others..."

Now it is becoming clearer that Padre Pio was not only living as a victim, identifying with the Spotless Victim who gave Himself on Calvary, but as a victim particularly in atonement for sinful and unworthy priests.

Fifteen months later, March 1913, in a letter to his confessor Fr Agostino, Pio described another similar vision. Jesus told him, "The ingratitude and sleep of my ministers make my agony more difficult to bear. Alas, how they return my love. What pains me even more is that they add scorn and unbelief to their indifference. How many times I was ready to destroy them, but I was held back by the angels and the souls that love me..."

A time of 'exile'

At Venafro Pio's health again collapsed completely and after five weeks Fr Agostino accompanies him back to his home in Pietrelcina. Once there, Pio is once again able to celebrate Holy Mass the next day as if nothing had

happened. But one result of those five weeks spent in the friary at Venafro is that we know without doubt that Padre Pio was offering himself as a victim for the sake of unworthy priests, sinners and souls in Purgatory.

All this time spent away from a friary of the Order he so loved, Pio later spoke of as his time of 'exile'. It pained him to be away from community life. He also suffered increased diabolical attacks, so that he would later refer to the time as his 'double exile', meaning he was separated from his brethren in the religious order and also that he longed for Heaven but was not allowed it.

Tests

Once during this time, Fr Agostino decided to test Pio's intimacy with his Guardian Angel. In September 1912 Agostino wrote him a letter entirely in Greek. Pio brought the letter along to his friend and parish priest at Pietrelcina. Before Don Pannullo could begin to translate it, Pio proceeded to tell him its meaning, word for word.

Later Don Pannullo wrote a testimony at the bottom of that letter. "I, the undersigned, testify on oath that when Padre Pio received this letter he explained its contents to me literally. When I asked him how he could read and explain it as he did not know even the Greek alphabet, he replied: 'You know! My Guardian Angel explained it all to me.' Signed, The Archpriest, Salvatore Pannullo."

At times Fr Agostino also wrote Pio letters in

French and once Padre Pio sent him a reply entirely in French. He explained that his Guardian Angel had told him what to write.

Years later, there are reports of people having confessed to him at San Giovanni Rotondo in different languages and Pio replying to them in their own tongue. This certainly happened to some American and English servicemen who visited him during the Second World War as the Allied Forces were making their way up from southern Italy to re-take Rome from the Germans.

All this time spent away from the friary was certainly unusual for a professed religious. In late 1914 all the details of the 'Padre Pio case' were told to the Superior-General of the Order when he made a visit to the Foggia Province. Fr General said that it was obviously God's will that Pio live outside the community and that he himself would seek the necessary dispensation. On 1st March the following year, 1915, word was received that Pope Benedict XV had granted to Padre Pio "the faculty requested to remain outside the cloister as long as necessary while continuing to wear the habit of his Order".

Spiritual Children

During this time also, both Fr Agostino and Fr Benedetto would recommend particular people to Padre Pio's prayers. Eventually Agostino put one such spiritual child, Raffaelina Cerase, in direct contact with Padre Pio and from March

1914 a correspondence grew up between them. Since his death this correspondence has been published as one volume of the existing letters of Padre Pio. The Vice-Postulator of the Padre's Cause for Canonisation, Fr Gerardo Di Flumeri, says these letters between Pio and Raffaolina "are a proof of the Padre's cultural grounding and that he is not an improvised spiritual director, but an enlightened guide of souls, sustained by an enviable theological, ascetic-mystical and biblical training."

With this and numerous other 'spiritual children' in the coming years, Padre Pio would engage in a prodigious correspondence. Up until 1922, that is, when all that would come to a sudden halt!

CONSCRIPTED

The First World War broke out in 1914 and on 23rd May 1915 Italy entered that war. Many of the Capuchin friars were among the men mobilised. Pio himself was soon called up, ordered to present himself to the military office in Benevento on 6th November 1915. In view of his poor health, he was sent from there to Caserta ‘for observation’ and then to Naples. After one examination in Naples, Pio wrote to Fr Agostino, “I don’t know if I will survive this harsh trial. I am unable to stay on my feet, my stomach, as usual, is becoming more and more obstinate and cannot retain any food at all ... The only food I can retain is the Sacred Species.

On 16th December a group of doctors examined him and, diagnosing ‘infection of the lungs’ they gave him a year’s leave for convalescence. He would have to report back for military service in December 1916.

Meanwhile, he returned home to Pietrelcina. Fathers Benedetto and Agostino were now convinced it was time for Pio to return to life in a friary, Agostino telling him in a letter of January 1916 that many people are praying for this intention and also that he believes that in Pio’s eventual return to a friary, “the glory of God and the salvation of souls is involved.”

By now, the people of Pietrelcina and its surrounds



Private Forgiare in military uniform.

were extremely attached to the young extremely pastoral and holy priest living among them. When Fr Agostino visited Pio at home earlier in 1915, word got out among the locals that he had come to take away their very own 'saint'! There was a threat of mob violence and Agostino was told they would have his head off rather than allow him to take away their saint. Don Pannullo had to intervene to restore calm and assure the people that Fr Agostino was not there to take away their Padre Pio!

On subsequent occasions, at San Giovanni Rotondo, the local people also rose up to prevent 'their' Padre Pio being transferred to another friary!

At the end of January 1916 Fr Agostino summons Padre Pio to Foggia, to visit Raffaelina Cerase, who was dying of cancer. Mindful of his experience on his last visit to Pietrelcina, Agostino decided not to go there but to meet Pio on 17th February at Benevento railway station instead! They travelled together from there to Foggia.

A return to community life

The next day, after two years of intense spiritual correspondence, Padre Pio and Raffaelina met for the first time. Agostino describes it as "a reunion between two souls who had known each other for a long time". We do not know what passed between the spiritual father and spiritual child at that first meeting. We do know that the next morning Padre Pio handed over his return ticket to

Pietrelcina to Fr Agostino and wrote home to his mother to send on the rest of his belongings.

For the next few weeks, while residing in the friary at Foggia, Padre Pio visited Raffaelina regularly, until she died on 25th March 1916. What Pio had not known when he came to visit Raffaelina was that she had already offered her life and her suffering as a victim that Padre Pio might be able to return to community life, as Agostino put it, “for the glory of God and the good of souls”.

The Capuchins, too, were delighted that their confrere was back among them. One of the friars at Foggia, Fr Alessandro Da Ripabottoni who would later write a book about his dealings with Padre Pio, described him as the life and soul of the community, “a happy spirit, a normal and balanced personality ... never happier than when he was telling humorous stories for the amusement of others.”

While they loved having him among them and enjoyed his company, the poor friars at Foggia had also to learn to cope with the diabolical attacks suffered by Padre Pio. While he was the life and soul of the community during the day, at night-time they would hear the infernal racket coming from Pio’s cell and would find him so drenched in sweat that he required a complete change of clothes. Under obedience to the Superior, Padre Pio explained that Satan came to his cell at night and the ghastly noises were of the resultant battle which took place between them.

The local bishop came to witness this for himself one

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