

ST. PADRE PIO OF PIETRELCINA

By Dom Augustine Marie, OSB

In a century [the 20th] prominently marked by atheism in theory and practice, God deigned to give an obvious sign of His presence. This Capuchin Friar, in whom Jesus Christ wished to renew the mystery of His Passion for a half century, is an exceptional witness. Beatified by Pope John Paul II on May 2, 1999 [and canonized a saint on June 16, 2002], Padre Pio reminds Christians and all of humanity that Jesus Christ is the unique Saviour of the world.

Francesco Forgione was born in 1887 in Pietrelcina, a village in southern Italy. From the earliest age, he received the grace of frequent visions of the Most Blessed Virgin. The devil also appeared to him often in the night in terrifying forms. Starting at the age of nine, he began, so to speak, a series of serious illnesses which would only end with his death. Nevertheless at the age of sixteen, he entered the Capuchin Order in which he took his vows under the name of Fra (Brother) Pio. But the young Brother's health did not improve. He had serious problems with his left lung; his bouts of fever broke the thermometers! In the hope that a more favorable climate would help to cure this inexplicable illness, he was moved to different monasteries several times. Then, from 1910 to 1916 he returned to his family in Pietrelcina. In spite of many obstacles, he was ordained a priest on August 10, 1910. He said, «How happy I was on that day. My heart was burning with love for Jesus... I had begun to taste Paradise.» He finally succeeded in settling into the monastery of San Giovanni Rotondo, near Foggia, in the province of Puglia.

Miracles in the twentieth century

On September 20, 1918, at the age of 31, he received the grace of the stigmata: bloody wounds in the hands, the feet, and the side, reproducing those of Jesus crucified. From that time on, he would lose the equivalent of a glass of blood every day for the next fifty years. One of his fellow Capuchins said, «There were not just stains on him, but real wounds going through the hands and the feet. I was able to observe the one on his side—a real opening that bled continually.» These wounds caused him continual spells of weakness, which, even though they were mild, were no less troublesome. In the face of such a grace, Padre Pio felt very unworthy, but he was happy to be like Christ. His superiors called in reputable doctors to examine the stigmata. These specialists confirmed the reality of the wounds. Some people attributed them to magnetic forces, others to autosuggestion, others to «psycho-physiological-pathological interactions»; but several realized that the cause of these wounds was beyond the realm of medical science. Cardinal Journet wrote, «The purpose of these stigmata is to remind us in a stunning way of the sufferings of God martyred for us and of the necessity for the entire Church to suffer and die before entering into glory... The stigmata are a bloody sermon, at the same time tragic and splendid. They will not allow us to forget what the true signs of the sincerity of love are.» At the beginning of the month of May, 1919, a little girl was suddenly cured after having a vision of Padre Pio. On May 28, a young soldier wounded during the war and declared incurable by the doctors, asked to be transported to see Padre Pio, who blessed him: he was totally cured immediately. These two miracles, reported in the newspapers, drew crowds. Beginning in 1919, three to five hundred pilgrims or curiosity seekers appeared each day at San Giovanni Rotondo. The rumor spread that

Padre Pio was able to look into one's soul. In fact, it occurred quite often. The beautiful and very rich Luisa V., drawn to San Giovanni Rotondo by sheer curiosity, was struck with such sorrow for her sins shortly after her arrival that she ended up sobbing in the middle of the church. Father came up to her and said: «Calm yourself, my child, mercy is boundless and the Blood of Christ washes away all the crimes of the world.» She answered, «I wish to confess, Padre.» He told her, «First calm down. You will come back tomorrow.» Not having been to confession since childhood, Signora V. spent the night remembering all of her sins. The next day, in the presence of the Padre, she was suddenly incapable of remembering her faults. Padre Pio helped her make a list of them, then he added, «Can't you remember anything else?» Luisa trembled at the thought of a serious sin that she dared not own up to. Padre Pio waited, silently moving his lips... Finally, she got a hold of herself: «There is still that one remaining, Padre,» which she then confessed. He answered, «Praise God! I give you absolution, my daughter...»

A clinic for souls

Padre Pio liked to say, «I am a confessor.» Indeed, it happened that he would spend fifteen to seventeen hours a day receiving penitents. More than a tribunal or a pulpit, his confessional was a clinic for souls. He welcomed penitents with different styles, depending on the needs of each one. To one, he would extend his arms in the exuberance of his joy, telling him where he came from even before the person opened his mouth. On others he heaped reproach. He admonished them, he even shoved them. Sometimes he was more demanding of a «good Christian» who had not fulfilled his duties than he was of a great sinner who was more or less ignorant of the divine laws. [He severely condemned sins against purity and against the laws of the procreation of life. He did not forgive these sins without being assured of an absolutely firm intention](#) and certain penitents would have to undergo months of probation before being absolved. Padre Pio thus showed the importance of contrition and firm intention in order to receive the sacrament of Penance. But where he found sincerity, he was gentle with a gentleness that filled the heart.

From the first words that he addressed to the penitent: «When was your last confession?» it was understood that Padre expected a confession that was clear, brief, complete and sincere. Five or six minutes was all he needed to completely transform someone's existence and to focus a dissolute life on God. There were instances when Padre would send away the penitent before he was finished: «Out! Go away! I don't want to see you before such and such a day...» His tone became imperious and severe. He knew that this «sending away» was a saving measure that would shake up the sinner, make him weep, push him to make an effort towards a change of heart. This way of doing things, which could be a bit surprising, fit within the framework of Padre Pio's pedagogical method. The method can be understood by his personal charisma and the enlightenment that he received from the Holy Spirit on the state of consciences. Souls subjected to this special energy only found peace when, sincerely penitent, they had returned to the feet of the confessor, who then revealed himself to be a father full of tenderness. However, Padre's suffering when he had to use these methods was immeasurable. One day he told another friar after having sent away a penitent with a bad disposition, «If you knew what arrows had first pierced my heart... But if I don't do it that way, there would be so many who would not be converted to God!»

Taking part himself in such an exceptional manner in body and in soul in the sufferings of the Redemption, he realized with particular acuity the seriousness of sin. An older gentleman, who

had not been to confession since the age of seven, knelt one day in the confessional of Padre Pio and, little by little, as his conscience unburdened itself, he saw Padre begin to grow pale and to sweat. Some penitents affirmed that they saw drops of blood come from his forehead while they described their infidelities. «Souls, souls! How costly is your salvation!» Padre cried out one day.

Nowadays, sin no longer horrifies people. Pope Paul VI said, «According to today's standards, one no longer considers men as sinners; they are catalogued according to whether they are healthy, sick, honest, good, strong, weak, rich, poor, educated, ignorant; but the word 'sin' is never encountered» (September 20, 1964). Nevertheless, there are men like Padre Pio who do not compromise with evil and who are stunned when they encounter sin and the misfortune of those who live in a state of mortal sin.

Padre Pio wept and sobbed when, while reading the Visits to the Most Blessed Virgin by Saint Alphonsus de Liguori, he uttered these words: «I thank you for everything you have done for me, in particular for having saved me from Hell, which I have so many times deserved.»

What is essential -- Prayer

It was in prayer that Padre Pio found the supernatural force to combat evil. Despite the suffering caused by his five wounds, he prayed much. Every day he meditated for four hours. He prayed with sighs of the heart, with ejaculatory prayers (short prayers shot towards Heaven like arrows), but above all with his Rosary. One often heard him say: «[Go to the Madonna. Love her! Always say the Rosary. Say it well. Say it as often as you can! Be souls of prayer. Never tire of praying, it is what is essential. Prayer shakes the Heart of God, it obtains necessary graces!](#)»

The pinnacle of the day and of prayer for Padre Pio was the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. «In this Divine Sacrifice which is celebrated in the Mass, the same Christ who offered Himself once in a bloody way on the altar of the Cross is contained and is offered in an unbloody manner» (Council of Trent; cf. CCC 1367). In the image of Christ with his stigmata, Padre Pio lived the Mass in intimate union with the Passion of Jesus: «The Mass is a type of sacred union between Jesus and me. Even though I am quite unworthy, I suffer all that He suffered, He who deigned to unite me with the mystery of the Redemption.» Padre often wept during the celebration of the Sacrifice, and as he explained to one person who was surprised about that: «Does it appear to you to be such a small thing that a God talks with His creatures? And that He be contradicted by them? And that He be continually wounded by their ingratitude and their disbelief?» Padre Pio's Mass could last an hour and a half or two hours. A French ambassador to the Holy See, having received the grace to participate in one of them, wrote: «I had never in my life attended such a stunning Mass. The Mass became—what in reality it is—an absolutely supernatural act. When the bells rang at the elevation of the Host, then of the Chalice, Padre Pio was immobilized in contemplation. How long?... Ten, twelve minutes, maybe longer. The only thing one heard in the crowd was the whisperings of prayer.»