

WHO IS PADRE PIO?

Never forget that in the hospital are also those who are dying.

O. Guarini

Preface

In writing this little book my object is to spread knowledge of Padre Pio of Pietrelcina, of the Capuchin Fathers, increasingly all over the world.

In a few pages the reader should be able to get some idea of this son of St. Francis of Assisi, who so much resembles the apostle of charity.

Unfortunately, the tumultuous existence that we lead interferes with reading large volumes; we are driven by too many occupations and interests and are obliged to take advantage of the merest fractions of our free time, which we often use in far different ways than in the renewal of our spiritual life.

Many people have complained to me by word of mouth or in writing that they were unable to read my books: "Per la Storia," "Fino alla Meta," and "Fatti Nuova," because of their cost, or from lack of time.

I believe that these difficulties have been eliminated with the publication of this little volume, and I hope that these same people will now be able to form an adequate picture in their minds of the Reverend Padre Pio of Pietrelcina. If as a result they feel the desire to know this messenger of love better, try by all means to go to him.

This may of course be impossible, because of a question of health or money. So the next best course is to read all that has been written about him, so that they may become familiar with this man of God who has been sent to us in this critical moment of the world's history.

They, too, will learn to "believe" in the fullest meaning of the word, since believing in a mystery truly admits of no limitations and no compromises with one's intellect, for if it did, we would be merely philosophizing.

In order to believe, however, it is essential to want to believe, and whoever goes to the Father with this intention will acquire courage for the fullness of life; living consists not only of Faith, but also of Hope and of Charity.

It is in the name of these three virtues that I am writing these pages, and whatever profit I make of them will be turned over to the "House for the Relief of Suffering," the magnificent hospital that was built by the Father in order to minister to the sufferings of the very poorest.

I declare, as I always do, that in obedience to the decrees of the Sovereign Pontiffs, I recount these facts with purely human credibility, having recourse to the prescriptions of the Church, our only Mother and Teacher.

—The Author

Biography

To tell of the Reverend Padre Pio of Pietrelcina is the easiest as well as the most difficult of tasks; it is easy since his life is like an open book in which all may read, but hard in that the impression received by each one who sees him is hardly ever the same as the next man's. These impressions are varied and complicated, according to the state of grace, the condition of conscience, the personality of the visitor.

Who is this Padre Pio? Many people have wondered hearing him spoken of so often.

I shall begin by saying that he is a very humble Capuchin who wears the habit of St. Francis of Assisi. He was born on May 25th, 1887 of poor country people, at Pietrelcina in the Province of Benevento. His father, who was called Zi'Orazio (Uncle Orazio) by everyone, died on the 7th of October, 1946 and is buried with his wife Giuseppa who died some years earlier, at San Giovanni Rotondo. Their tomb is visited by all pilgrims who come to see the Padre.

Padre Pio was born of parents who were poor in material things but rich in matters of the spirit, for they had a deep love and respect for our holy religion. He was baptized Francesco Forgione, and grew up in Pietrelcina. He was different from his contemporaries in that he did not share in the wild games and adventures or the strife of the other boys. From his earliest childhood he showed a kind of recollection of spirit and a love for the things of God, seeing Him in the beauty of the clouds and the stars and loving to hear of His Goodness.

This awareness of God brings with it a sort of change in focus on the world and in his case, developed a profound conception of justice, discrimination of good and evil, of the pure and the impure. At the same time it implanted in his soul a grace and gentleness that led him toward the goal that he had set himself, which was to perfect his nature and live ever more in harmony with his ideals.

In spite of this, the little peasant boy took part in the rural festivities and the simple life of his family. When the grown-ups danced or beat out the grain on the threshing floor of their houses and the children played about their mothers' skirts, or when the bigger boys were teasing each other with practical jokes, little Francesco, who had surely never heard of the Cantic of the Sun, was expressing the same ideas in his own words when he praised God and Mother Earth and his brother the Sun, all of the natural beauty surrounding him and filling him with joy.

From a very inadequate private tutor he received the first instructions in reading and arithmetic, but this poor man was able to teach him little. Family gossips blamed the pupil rather than the teacher for the little progress that was made, but they were wrong, for as soon as the boy was entrusted to another teacher, a certain Caccavo, with whom he remained until he was fourteen, little Francesco immediately showed a lively intelligence.

In 1902 his father entered him in the monastery of Morcone where he was to prepare for the novitiate. His superior was extremely severe with him, and Padre Pio admits to never having seen the countryside when walking about with his classmates, as they were all obliged to keep their eyes fixed on the ground.

It was at this time that he began his severe penances and fasting. When his parents went to see him, they found him so emaciated and run-down that they tried to take

him home. The Father Provincial, however, having sensed a quality in his young pupil that distinguished him from the others, persuaded the parents to leave him.

From Marcone he went to Sant'Elia in Panisi, and then to Venafro, where he lived for twenty-one days with the Sacred Host as his sole nourishment. In spite of his fasting he had gained weight, and when Zi'Orazio came to see him a year later he was pleased with his appearance.

After this he was transferred to Serra Capriola, to Montefusco, and to other places, where he continued his advance on the road to perfection through penance, fasting and prayer.

Whereas Our Lord was well pleased with His new servant, Satan, the spirit of Evil, seeing that this most desirable prey was evading him, proceeded to tempt him with unprecedented variety and violence.

Whenever he was forced by his poor health to seek a little change, he came back to Pietrelcina and his father's house.

He was once advised to take off his monk's habit and become a secular priest, but he refused, not wishing to be unfaithful to St. Francis.

One day as he was walking with the Pastor of the village, when they had reached the open country he suddenly stopped and became rapt in a kind of trance while listening to the ringing of distant church bells.

"What is the matter with you?" asked Don Salvatore.

"Nothing," he answered, "but the sound of those bells reminds me of bells of the vanished monastery; it will some day be here again, and larger and more beautiful than before!"

It seemed to him that he was hearing a chorus of Angels giving praise to the Lord, and he added: "I don't know when this will come about, but it will."

It happened that in June 1947, His Excellency Msgr. Manginelli, Bishop of Benevento, did consecrate in Pietrelcina a monastery of the Capuchin Fathers. It had been endowed twenty years earlier by a spiritual daughter and convert of Padre Pio's, a well-to-do American lady, Miss Mary Pyle.

In this same monastery on the 20th of September, 1947, being the thirtieth anniversary of the appearance of the Stigmata on the Padre, some of his spiritual children presented him with a ciborium and some vestments.

The dream of the young novice had become a reality.

However, before all these things were to happen, he had to go through much suffering and many disappointments; his pallor betrayed to many that he had the disease that cannot be ignored—tuberculosis.

However, the infinite mercy of God never disappoints those who place in Him all of their confidence, and the Padre had more than once told himself: "Oh Lord, I have done Your will!" He knew, besides, that suffering was the surest way for God to enter his soul and never leave it.

Padre Pio knew well that in order to receive one must give, and he gave all of himself. The only complaint ever to pass his lips was that he had not given enough and had received too much.

His Ordination

On the 10th of August, 1910, Padre Pio was ordained in the Cathedral of Benevento. The city had once been named "Maleventum" or Evil Wind by its founder Diomedes, because of the violent winds that prevail there, but the Romans renamed it "Beneventum," or Good Wind.

The higher the Padre mounted up the scale of perfection, the more fiercely did Satan attack him. One night he

saw his bed surrounded by the most fearful monsters who shouted to him: "See, the Saint is retiring!"

"Yes, in spite of you!" he answered; and was promptly seized, shaken and beaten to the ground.

The more he was tormented by the Devil, the greater grew his faith and his love for Our Lord.

Another time, when he was ill in bed, he saw a friar come into his cell who looked like his former confessor, Father Agostino. The apparition proceeded to advise him to give up his practice of penance, of which God did not approve. Padre Pio, much astonished, ordered his visitor to call out: "Viva Gesù!" The strange creature disappeared, leaving behind a strong smell of sulphur.

He had many of these supernatural manifestations, and has had many since, but it would take too long to describe even the most startling of them.

During this period, the good Father Agostino, although getting on in years, continued to follow the career of his much-loved disciple and kept up a lively correspondence with him. When our Holy Mother the Church comes to permit the publication of these letters, it will be possible to learn about the mysterious attacks that the poor Father has undergone from his terrible and invisible enemies. In the meantime he was ordered by the Archpriest to give over the unopened letters to him, without having read them.

One day a letter came to Padre Pio from Father Agostino, whose writing he recognized; he took it to the Archpriest who, having opened it, found a plain sheet of paper with no writing on it. "The good father must have forgotten to write anything," he said, "or else he just put a sheet of paper in the envelope instead of the letter."

"No," answered Padre Pio, "he did not forget, it is 'those gentlemen' who want to play me their usual trick."

"What do you know about it?"

“I know . . .”

“You think so! Then you will no doubt be able to tell me what was in the letter?”

“Most certainly!” and he proceeded to tell him exactly what Father Agostino had written to him.

The Archpriest, not believing Padre Pio, wrote to Father Agostino and his answer confirmed the truth as it had been told him.

Many things of this sort happened to him and others besides, but it would take too long to tell of them. The most notable grace, however, that he received from Almighty God was that of the Stigmata.

The Stigmata

Padre Pio first received the invisible Stigmata in Pietrelcina on the 20th of September 1915, and the visible ones at San Giovanni Rotondo on the same date in 1918. This did not happen in the case of the seventy other stigmatists that the Church has so far canonized. Gemma Galgani is the latest of these to be so honored.

Much could be said on the subject of this supernatural gift with which Padre Pio has been blessed by Divine Providence, but I, for one, am too ignorant not only to explain the gift, but to discuss its nature. I shall only say that the invisible Stigmata came to him while he was in the garden or orchard of his home in Pietrelcina, on a morning in September in the year 1915.

Only his confessor, Don Salvatore Panullo, is in a position to know the whole story, and his account of it has been transmitted to Rome and placed in the safe-keeping of our Holy Mother the Church. We know that on that day, Padre Pio began his ascent of Mount Tabor, the scene of the Transfiguration. Since Our Lord was his model, and

he was in a state of grace, God gave him this sign of His love which he had received through hardship and suffering accepted for His Divine Son and offered to Him.

God became man in Christ, to suffer for men and among men, and Padre Pio, being a man, imitated Christ, the Divine Master. The Capuchin had been more than once heard to repeat the sublime words: "Father in Heaven, do with me what You will, not what I will!"

But on Friday, the 20th of September 1918, there happened to him an event that not only changed his whole life, but that singled him out from the rest of humanity. He was praying in his stall in the choir when suddenly the monks heard a piercing cry. On running to find the cause of it they came upon Padre Pio lying unconscious on the floor of the choir, his hands, his feet and his side marked with deep, bleeding wounds. He was carried to his cell where he gradually recovered consciousness, begging his brothers to keep his secret. He had worn invisible stigmata for three years, and now they were there for all to see. They have remained the same until this day. He has been the subject of endless and often painful medical examinations, and has undergone every kind of supposedly healing treatment, but the wounds remain open and completely free from infection. He loses about a cupful of blood every day from his side, which is covered at all times with a linen cloth to prevent the endless staining of his garments. He wears brown half gloves on his hands excepting when he is saying Mass. Nobody knows how much Padre Pio suffers from his wounds, but his rather halting gait is evidence enough of his constant awareness of his transpierced feet. When asked if the Stigmata were painful, he laughingly replied: "Do you think that the Lord gave them to me for a decoration?"

I shall not dwell upon the manner in which the news spread like lightning all over the village, the Puglie, the

Continent of Europe, and finally the whole world.

Padre Pio is the first priest ever to have received the Stigmata, for St. Francis was not a priest.

As I have said, the whole world began to hear of this wonder, and our Holy Mother the Church, ever prudent, ordered that the facts be examined by scientific methods.

The first person to be sent there to make a report, was Doctor Luigi Romanelli of Barletta. After five visits he felt obliged to state that he: "had been unable to discover a scientific explanation that would authorize him to classify such wounds."

This was a positive statement, but also full of spiritual meaning, as it declared science to be beyond its depth, and unable to explain the circumstances or the facts.

The newspapers sent their correspondents, who were in a great state of bewilderment, but who, all of them, whether willing or no, were forced to admit the truth of what they saw.

From that time San Giovanni Rotondo became the objective of pious pilgrimages. People came to the Father to beg his help and intercession with the God of all Love. The good that the Father has accomplished until now is known only to God, who has it written in His great book, for men are not always grateful. Although there are plenty who openly declare and confirm in writing the miracles or graces they have obtained, there are others who, having gotten what they were so ardently longing for, no longer wish to hear Padre Pio spoken of, and claim that things would have turned out that way anyhow, without his prayers.

These are the ones that I am most sorry for, more than for any atheist who does not believe and for one who does not see, for these do not wish to believe although they have seen. They are the unfortunate ones, like a certain Roman professor who, although he had seen the truth