

PADRE PIO AND AMERICA

*“He shall feed his flock like a shepherd:
he shall gather together the lambs with his
arm, and shall take them up in his bosom,
and he himself shall carry them that are
with young.”*

—Isaias 40:11



Our Lady of Grace Friary

Padre Pio distributing medals to American GIs.

PADRE PIO AND AMERICA

(Formerly *The Holy Man on the Mountain*)

Frank M. Rega

*“And I will give you pastors according to
my own heart, and they shall feed you
with knowledge and doctrine.”*

—Jeremias 3:15

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the American GIs who met
Padre Pio during World War II,
and to their families and friends, whose co-operation,
sharing and enthusiasm
have made this book possible.

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Bernard Ruffin for sharing documents he received from the late Fr. John Schug, related to the “Flying Monk” episodes.

There are so many World War II veterans and their spouses who eagerly shared their stories and photos, that I don’t want to single out any in particular, since it would be unfair to the others. Their names appear together in the “oral history” section of the references, as well as in the text itself. I would like to thank them for giving me a sense of the great affection they felt for Padre Pio, and of how important it was for them to be able to share their memories of him. They made me realize that it was both a privilege and a responsibility to be able to gather their testimonies for this book.

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Preface

I came to know of Padre Pio only gradually, discovering him just a few years after his death in 1968. Perhaps a friend had told me about him, or I might have heard of him through my interest in St. Francis of Assisi. As a Capuchin friar, Padre Pio was himself a Franciscan. I cannot recall any particular book or article I read about him; instead, it seems that this friar from Southern Italy, well, just crept up on me.

As I learned more about him, and saw the photos of his friary, of Our Lady of Grace Church and of the adjacent hospital he built, called the House for the Relief of Suffering, an attraction for this distant realm began to grow. Soon the very words themselves, such as “Gargano” mountain and the nearby shrine to St. Michael, “Monte Sant’Angelo,” and the Italian name for his hospital, *Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza*, began to take on a fairy-tale quality. Even the names of the towns associated with him, “San Giovanni Rotondo” and “Pietrelcina,” conjured up some magical sunshiny world. Included in this world was “Foggia,” the provincial capital which played an important part in Padre Pio’s life and turns up in so many stories about the American soldiers who visited him during the War. Foggia was the closest rail terminal to the Friary, where the trains from Rome and Naples dropped off their pilgrims and visitors, and to me it seemed to be the imaginary gateway to this mystical land.

But most of all, it was the sense of the spiritual and of the peaceful awareness of God that one associates with Padre Pio and the places where he lived that continued to attract me. Finally, in the early 1990’s, with the approach of the 25th anniversary of his death, I began to read about a spate of

“Padre Pio Pilgrimages” leaving from the United States for San Giovanni Rotondo, Rome, Assisi and other Italian shrines. The lure could no longer be resisted. Although I had never been out of the U.S.A. and was about 50 years old, I obtained my passport, signed up for an anniversary trip and began to learn the Italian language during Monday evening adult education classes. Even though my heritage is from the “Old Country” via my grandparents, I had never learned the language. My parents, who were born in America, only spoke Italian when they didn’t want us children to know what they were talking about!

On the 1993 pilgrimage that I had ultimately chosen, our group’s anticipation grew as the bus made its way into Southern Italy. As we climbed the slopes of the Gargano, my eyes were taking in everything, hoping to catch that first glimpse of a building or landscape that I could recognize from the pictures I had seen. We reached the outskirts of San Giovanni Rotondo while it was still daylight, and then suddenly I spotted it, jutting out from the side of the mountain, extending along the hillside, solid looking, like a golden granite monument. It was Padre Pio’s great legacy, his majestic hospital, the House for the Relief of Suffering. I had seen so many photos of it in books, and now it seemed that one of these photographs had just come to life, moving in three dimensions as the bus slowly rolled along. Soon the Friary and its churches, the original and the newer one, came into view. I had entered another world, not just geographically, but spiritually and with my whole being.

Here was a world where the only regret is that one has to leave it behind—but always with the hope of returning soon. Hence, it was not long before I began planning my second trip, and a year later I joined Jeanette and Joan Salerno’s “Pilgrimage to Padre Pio—1994.” We were fortunate to have as our spiritual director the late Fr. John Schug, author of

two of my favorite books about Padre Pio. It was on this pilgrimage that I heard the story of the “Flying Monk.” During the Second World War, not a bomb fell on San Giovanni Rotondo, although nearby cities such as Foggia lay in ruins. Reportedly, Allied pilots did not drop their deadly cargo over Padre Pio’s town because the apparition of a bearded monk in the skies waved them away. Coincidentally, at the very time of our visit, one of the leading Italian weekly magazines ran a feature story on the “Flying Monk,” which had most of us on the trip buzzing, especially Fr. Schug. Tales such as this only enhanced my interest in learning more about this saintly “miracle man.”

There were two more visits to San Giovanni Rotondo during the nineties. During this time I continued progressing little by little in my Italian, to the point where I subscribed to the Italian language edition of the monthly magazine, *The Voice of Padre Pio*, published at Padre Pio’s friary by the Capuchins. I also kept up my interest in him by building an extensive web site, www.sanpadrepio.com and by starting an internet-based Padre Pio discussion and prayer group.

In the fall of 2003, I took an early retirement from my career as a software engineer. Two of my friends, who do not know each other and who live on opposite sides of the country, suggested, almost simultaneously, that I pursue my interest in writing. It seemed the natural choice to write about Padre Pio. The idea for this particular book about his connections with America and Americans . . . well . . . just crept up on me.

Introduction

Rome, June 16, 2002. Pope John Paul II canonized a new Saint, an Italian known and loved throughout the world and especially in the United States of America, Padre Pio of Pietrelcina. The Pope announced that he is to be officially designated in the registry of the Church's Saints as "St. Pio of Pietrelcina." But to millions around the world he remains simply . . . Padre Pio.

Padre Pio was one of the spiritual giants of the 20th century, and among contemporary Catholics, he ranks with Mother Teresa in fame and following. Born in 1887, he lived until shortly after Vatican Council II, passing away in 1968. He belonged to the Capuchin Order, a branch of the Franciscans, and was the first Catholic priest in history to receive the stigmata, the wounds of Christ. (St. Francis, the first known stigmatist, was a deacon.) His popularity continues to grow in the United States, where numerous organizations, foundations and individual ministries are dedicated to propagating his memory and teachings.

Americans familiar with Padre Pio view him from a host of perspectives. Some see him as a great thaumaturge, the miracle worker of the age, who effected innumerable cures of both body and soul. Many are fascinated by tales of his gift of bilocation, when reliable witnesses saw him in faraway places and countries, while at the same time he was ensconced in a little friary in Italy. He was a priest who heard Confessions like no other priests of his day, revealing to people the secret sins they had neglected to confess. He communicated with the souls of the deceased in Purgatory and with his Guardian Angel. Many consider his Mass to

have been our most perfect living image of Christ's own suffering and death. Theologians see him as one of the most important mystics in the history of the Church. But to himself, he was merely a "simple friar who prays."

The life of this 20th-century Saint, who never left Italy, is interwoven with America to a surprising extent. It was his father's emigration to the United States in order to find employment that earned the money that enabled him to study for the priesthood. Although basically a cloistered monk, he built one of the greatest hospitals in Europe, largely through generous contributions from American citizens. Like St. Francis of Assisi, who had his counterpart in St. Clare, or like St. John of the Cross and his contemporary, St. Teresa of Avila, St. Padre Pio had a counterpart in Mary Pyle. She was a wealthy Manhattan heiress who renounced an aristocratic lifestyle in order to live near his friary for the last 45 years of her life. Her home in San Giovanni Rotondo came to be considered "an extension of the monastery." It was Mary Pyle who once said, "The world will some day be surprised to find out who Padre Pio really was."¹

Padre Pio owed much of his international fame to the American and other Allied soldiers who visited him during World War II and returned home to tell friends, relatives and others about him. The eyewitness accounts of the American GIs, many presented here for the first time, reflect the deep affection they felt for Padre Pio. In addition to their obvious admiration and reverence for him, their stories often convey the strong personal bond they developed with the Saint, sometimes even after the briefest of visits. The portrait of Padre Pio that is revealed from their observations is that of a likeable, warm and friendly man, filled with Franciscan joy and cheer. This is in contrast to a false impression of him that has occasionally surfaced, that of a gruff, ill-mannered and even testy ascetic. This unjust conclusion arose prima-

rily because he was sometimes forced to be harsh with fanatical visitors, and on occasion he refused absolution in Confession to insincere penitents.

In order to understand the interaction between Padre Pio and the Americans, it is necessary to do so against the backdrop of an overview of his life; thus, a comprehensive biography of the Saint is presented within these pages. However, much of the book is comprised of the testimonies and impressions of those fortunate GIs who met him during the War years. Whenever possible, these stories are told in the soldiers' own words. Their narratives also include some of the supernatural occurrences that were almost a normal part of the everyday events that encompassed the Saint's life. What emerges is a valuable historical record of that important period when America, in the person of hundreds of GIs in uniform, met Padre Pio for the first time.

The book also discusses people who popularized Padre Pio in this country, both during and after his lifetime, such as William Carrigan and Mario Bruschi. In addition, Americans who chose to live and work beside the Saint are given special focus, including Mary Pyle and Joe Peterson. Mary's observation that "There is a living Saint in this world, and it saddens me not to be near him,"² amply explains why many Americans took up residence in San Giovanni Rotondo for varying lengths of time.

Some would volunteer to aid the friars in handling the enormous English-language correspondence. Others acted as interpreters, assisted pilgrims, or helped out in the monastery. They would return to the United States as changed persons, often inspired by Padre Pio to enter the priesthood or religious life. One American from Brooklyn initially came to see him out of curiosity and ended up becoming an ordained Capuchin priest assigned to Padre Pio's friary. He was Fr. Joseph Pius, known and loved by hundreds of

American pilgrims who were fortunate to have met him before he passed away unexpectedly in May, 2000. In 1985, while he was editor of *The Voice of Padre Pio* magazine, Fr. Joseph wrote,

You would need a book to tell the complete story of Padre and “the good America.” Maybe that will be completed in Heaven, for there are many signs showing that Padre Pio is still keeping up the friendship. And so are the Yanks.³

Padre Pio often told the GIs that he wanted all Americans to be his spiritual children. In fact, in the United States, and indeed throughout the world, devotion to him continues to grow, as ever greater numbers of Catholics and non-Catholics become aware of his greatness. Since it has been primarily the sanctity and personal qualities of Padre Pio that have drawn Americans toward him, this book will emphasize the spirituality and humanity of the Saint. Yet, stories of signs and wonders are also recounted in this volume, as they invariably are when telling of Padre Pio. The book attempts to illustrate the remarkable connection between the Saint and Americans, and hopefully it will shed some light on the mystery of Padre Pio’s affection for us and how it has been reciprocated. Of course, the complete story of Padre Pio and America will only be told in Heaven.