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Introduction

In September 1968, the Italian Capuchin priest known worldwide as Padre Pio felt extremely ill and weak. On September 22, he celebrated his usual 5:00 a.m. Mass, but felt so weak that he collapsed. At 2:30 the next morning, he passed away peacefully. His death made headlines all over the world.

During Padre Pio's eighty-one years, hundreds of thousands of pilgrims traveled to this humble man's monastery in San Giovanni Rotondo, Italy, to see and hear him, to confess to him, and to attend the Masses he celebrated. Pilgrims today still flock to San Giovanni and to Pio's crypt. Many thousands still ask Pio to intercede for them. While Pio lived, pilgrims from around the world often heard him say, "I can do even more for you after death." In fact, the church approved two miracles wrought through Padre Pio's intercession after his death, allowing Pope John Paul II to canonize him in 2002, proclaiming him "Saint" Padre Pio.

"Throughout the centuries, God has chosen some souls in whom he has renewed the passion of his Son in a very special manner," one biographer has observed, adding, "In the twentieth century, he chose Padre Pio."¹ Just like his Franciscan predecessor, St. Francis of Assisi, Padre Pio bore the stigmata—the bleeding wounds of Christ in his hands, feet, and side. In doing so, he reminded believers everywhere of the mystery, joy, and suffering to be found in the cross of Christ.

PIO'S STORY

In 1887, while the Industrial Revolution continued to help raise northern Italy's standard of living, southern Italy remained almost entirely preindustrial and poor. On May 25 of that same year, Francesco Forgione was born in Pietrelcina, a small village in southern Italy, to simple, devout, hardworking farmers, Orazio and Giuseppa Forgione.

In Pietrelcina as well as in all of southern Italy, the infant mortality rate was high. Nevertheless, even though two of the Forgione babies had died in infancy, five children, including Francesco, survived.

By the time he was five, Francesco had promised fidelity to St. Francis of Assisi. In spite of his poor health, young Francesco tried to imitate Francis by doing penance. For example, even though his mother provided him with a warm, soft bed, Francesco often slept on the cold stone floor. His parents taught their children to place God above all else, and Francesco did. His staunch faith and obedience to his parents set a strong example for his siblings and peers.

When he was old enough, Francesco often helped his parents tend their crops in the rocky fields. As the boy grew older, his father asked him what he wanted to do with his life. Francesco, who had seen the Franciscan Capuchin friars in their brown robes and beards, replied, "I want to be a monk with a beard."²

Francesco also wanted to enter the priesthood, but that would

require many years of expensive schooling, which Orazio Forgione could not afford. Nevertheless, Orazio found a solution. Like hundreds of men in southern Italy, Orazio emigrated to America. There he toiled at common-labor jobs, each week sending nine American dollars to his wife, Giuseppa. With that small sum, she fed and clothed her five children and sent Francesco to school.

Francesco wanted to embrace the prayerful, austere life of the Capuchins, but he would have to leave his beloved family. In January 1903, fifteen-year-old Francesco courageously left home to enter the Capuchin Friary of Morcone. He donned the novice habit, and took the name Fra (Brother) Pio. By 1910, despite his perennially poor health, Pio completed the required studies. On August 10 he was ordained a priest.

Sickness and the Army

The day after his ordination, Padre (Father) Pio journeyed to Pietrelcina to celebrate his first Mass. Pio's family and friends attended, without Orazio, who still worked in America.

World War I and its horrors arrived, and in 1915 the Italian Army drafted Padre Pio. But over the next few years, after repeatedly sending him home for poor health and then calling him back into service, the Army gave up: on March 16, 1918, Pio received an honorable discharge. After a few days visiting his family in Pietrelcina, Pio reunited with the Capuchins at San Giovanni Rotondo's Our Lady of Grace Capuchin Friary, which he had first visited in 1916.

The town of San Giovanni Rotondo lies in the “spur” of boot-shaped Italy, in a chain of mountains near the Adriatic Sea. Like Pietrelcina during Pio’s childhood, San Giovanni was a small, poor town when Padre Pio first arrived there. Most of its inhabitants were forced to settle for any type of work they could get, most often physical labor that entailed sacrifice and hardship. Few in the town could read, write, or afford “luxuries” like new clothing. The road to the Capuchin friary, according to one of Pio’s biographers, was “an impractical, narrow cattle track . . . full of stones and potholes. During the winter it was covered with mud and puddles of water, and in the summer it was infested with serpents and vipers.”³

The Stigmata

Eight years before receiving the visible, bleeding wounds of Christ in 1918, Pio received a “temporary” stigmata. The unusual red marks, which appeared on his hands and side while he was in Pietrelcina recovering from a long illness, did not bleed. Nevertheless, they caused him constant, extreme pain. Too embarrassed to show them to anyone, Pio hid the stigmata even from his mother. Finally, on September 7, 1910, after bearing those wounds for perhaps only a few months, he showed the marks to Pietrelcina’s priest, Fr. Salvatore Panullo. Fr. Panullo sent him to a physician, who could find no natural cause for Pio’s pain.

A few days later, Padre Pio again visited Fr. Panullo and told

him that although he wanted to suffer all of the physical pain of the marks in reparation for the sins of humanity, he did not want anyone to see them. He wanted to bear all physical pain in secret and, in doing so, to fulfill the words of St. Paul, “to complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church” (Colossians 1:24). During his second visit to Fr. Panullo, Pio asked the priest to pray with him for Jesus to take away the physical signs of the wounds but to leave the intense pain of them. At first, the visible signs of the temporary stigmata disappeared, only to return and then disappear again.

On November 29, 1910, Padre Pio wrote to his superior, Fr. Benedetto Nardella, asking permission to offer himself to Jesus as a “victim” for the salvation of sinners and for the holy souls in purgatory. Pio knew that Jesus would accept his sufferings to help atone for the sins of the living and of those in purgatory. Without a doubt, Pio believed that the Lord wanted him to make this lifelong sacrifice of himself. In his reply to Pio, Fr. Benedetto heartily agreed to his request.

The temporary stigmata may have been a sign that Jesus had indeed accepted Padre Pio’s offering of himself as a “victim” for sinners. After Pio’s return to San Giovanni, the Lord again seemed to accept him as a “victim” by giving him—in the friary church on September 20, 1918—the permanent, visible, ever-bleeding stigmata on Pio’s hands, feet, and side. After Pio received these wounds of Christ, his fame and reputation for holiness spread rapidly over Italy and around the world. The

number of pilgrims to San Giovanni swelled, gradually transforming the unknown little village into today's modern bustling town, famous throughout the world. Most in San Giovanni agree that the name and holiness of Padre Pio brought about this remarkable transformation.

His Enemies

In spite of his holiness, spiritual gifts, and unquenchable love for God and neighbor, Pio had enemies. In 1919, a few well-known priests and theologians told the Vatican that Pio was a fraud. Among Pio's enemies, the psychologist and theologian Fr. Agostino Gemelli told Rome that Pio's hysterical mind had caused the stigmata. The archbishop of Manfredonia, Pasquale Gagliardi, swore that Pio had inflicted the stigmata himself and that demons possessed Pio.

Within the same time period, the media printed rumors that Pio's confreres at the San Giovanni Rotondo friary were making money promoting Padre Pio to the faithful who flocked to him for counseling, confession, intercession, and healing. When Pio's enemies, including Gagliardi, recommended that the Vatican prohibit him from continuing his ministries at San Giovanni, Pope Benedict XV would not agree to it. In fact, as long as Benedict lived, he and other top church authorities staunchly supported Pio and protected him from his enemies.

Unfortunately, in January 1922 the pope died from complications due to pneumonia, and the archbishop of Milan, Achille

Ratti, succeeded him as Pope Pius XI. Immediately, Gagliardi visited the new pope and made scathing allegations—proved years later to be lies—about Padre Pio. Among other claims, Gagliardi denounced Pio as possessed by demons. Finally, by the spring of 1922, as a result of Gagliardi’s “war” against Pio, Pius XI ordered the Vatican’s Holy Office (the title used before Vatican II for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) to investigate the matter. Relying on doubtful witnesses like Gagliardi, the Holy Office ordered Fr. Giuseppantonio Busso-lari, the Capuchin minister general, to transfer Padre Pio to a distant friary (to be chosen by the Capuchins). But when the people of San Giovanni found out about the proposed transfer, they—along with some of the local civic authorities—threatened violence against anyone who might try to take away their beloved priest, and so Fr. Giuseppantonio backed down and did not transfer Pio.

Nevertheless, Padre Pio’s enemies continued to bombard church officials with false accusations against him. Finally, in July 1923, Fr. Giuseppantonio decided to transfer Pio. But when one of Pio’s local devotees (today known by sources only as “Donato”) threatened to murder Padre Pio if he were transferred, church authorities reconsidered and suspended the order.

In April 1931, when news reached San Giovanni that church authorities again were planning to transfer Padre Pio, the citizens of the town protested. Believing that the priest belonged exclusively to them, hundreds of the townspeople rallied around

his monastery and created such an uproar that news of their demonstration reached the Vatican. That news was all Gagliardi and a few other church authorities needed to get Rome to take action against the innocent Pio.

On June 11, 1931, the Holy Office sent an order to the San Giovanni monastery that forbade Padre Pio to practice his priestly duties, except for saying daily Mass. Even then, he was only allowed to celebrate Mass privately in the monastery's inner chapel. The news caused Pio tremendous pain, but he submitted to the will of the church, believing that in doing so he was submitting to the will of God. This sacrifice lasted two years, during which Padre Pio continually offered his suffering to God for the sins of the world and for the souls in purgatory.

Until March 1933, Pope Pius XI had based the restrictions of Padre Pio on information provided by Gagliardi and other authorities who were biased against Pio. However, that month, Pope Pius decided to send two of his personally chosen officials to San Giovanni to investigate Pio. On July 14, 1933, after these two officials gave the pope a favorable report concerning the priest, Pope Pius reversed the ban he had placed on Pio.

When the good news reached the San Giovanni friary and the superior told Padre Pio and his fellow friars in the dining hall, tears filled Pio's eyes, and he asked the superior to relay his gratitude to the pope.⁴

PIO'S SPIRITUALITY

Thousands of people from all over the world sought the fruits of Padre Pio's spiritual life. His faithfulness to prayer and to adoration of Christ in the Eucharist led his superiors at Our Lady of Grace Capuchin Friary to ask Pio for spiritual advice. His emphasis on the Mass and confession led thousands of people to new life in Jesus Christ.

Padre Pio expressed his spirituality by devotion to the Eucharist, to Mary, to the church, and to the pope. He also nurtured a tender devotion to guardian angels, the saints, and the souls in purgatory. Pio frequently meditated before the Blessed Sacrament in the tabernacle. Pio's words hint at the depth of his devotion: "My heart feels drawn by a higher force each morning before I am united with Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament."⁵

The Holy Spirit gave Padre Pio many spiritual gifts, which God used to bring countless souls to Christ. For example, in the confessional, Pio often recited penitents' sins before they confessed them. If someone hid a deadly sin from him, Pio would remind him about it. The penitent would repent, receive forgiveness, and joyfully place himself in God's hands. Pio also prophesied, counseled, healed, and performed miracles. He could bilocate—appear in more than one place at a time—and he had the gift of perfume that emanated from him. "It is a sign that I am close to the soul [who experiences it]," he explained to one of his brothers.⁶

But what most influenced people to turn to God were Pio's inner qualities, not his visibly spectacular gifts. What drew people to the Lord were Pio's uncompromising adherence to his principles; his speaking the truth at all times to all people, even if the truth might not be easy to hear; and his unwavering humility and obedience. When people met Pio, they realized that he was a man of God. This made them want the same holiness and peace he possessed. They saw how Pio trusted God with a child-like faith in spite of his constant physical sufferings, including the pain of his stigmata. Most of all, Pio's visitors sensed his unrelenting and ever-growing love of God and neighbor.

How did Pio's love for God manifest itself? His constant determination to help those suffering—physically, spiritually, and emotionally—demonstrated his love. With only a small, rudimentary hospital serving San Giovanni in 1918, Padre Pio decided to build a large, modern hospital, despite the mercilessly rocky ground that was part of the landscape. Pio's faithful friend and caregiver, Fr. Alessio Parente, knew that the saint's constant suffering helped him to empathize with and love all who suffered. "And this great love of [Padre Pio's]," wrote Fr. Alessio, "has been immortalized in the shape of his hospital."⁷

Pio's spirituality is captured in the fifteen meditations that are included in *Praying with Padre Pio*. Here is a short summary of the themes that will be covered:

Holy Gift of Prayer

Padre Pio's spirituality was fostered by continual prayer, including the Mass, the rosary, meditation on Christ's passion, and contemplation. "If you can speak to the Lord," wrote Pio, "do so. . . . If you are unable to speak . . . don't worry. In the ways of the Lord, stop in your room . . . and pay him homage. He will see this and will be pleased with your patience; he will favor your silence."⁸

During the Second World War, in response to a request by Pope Pius XII, Padre Pio urged all his followers (often referred to as his "spiritual children") to form prayer groups to pray for the world. Padre Pio prayer groups now number in the thousands throughout the world.

Confession and Forgiveness

Pio's gifts in the confessional reflect the grace of this sacrament available for those who practice it. Penitents who approached Pio in the confessional discovered that he could "simply, clearly, and compassionately tell them how they stood with God. . . . The greatest proof of Pio's effectiveness, not to mention his sanctity, was that through his ministry lives were changed."⁹

God's Presence

Pio urged his followers to always acknowledge the presence of God. "Hold resolutely to the comforting thought," said Pio, "that God is with you all the time and will never abandon you."¹⁰

God Is Love

“The pivot of perfection is love,” said Pio. “He who lives in love lives in God because ‘God is love’ [1 John 4:8].”¹¹ By heroically sacrificing everything to bring people to salvation, Padre Pio showed them the face of God.

Heavenly Obedience

Whether advising a priest, a religious, or a layperson, Padre Pio stressed obedience to one’s “superiors.” The church and Scripture held top priority in his personal practice of obedience. “Where there is no obedience,” said Pio, “there is no virtue.”¹²

Jesus Suffers with You

Padre Pio urged everyone to accept their daily crosses and thereby obtain blessings through suffering for themselves and for others. “He teaches and repeats that ‘the cross,’ whatever name it is given and whatever painful form it takes in life, will always . . . be the identity card of souls chosen by the heavenly Father.”¹³

Jesus in the Eucharist

Pio continually stressed the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist and the strength we can gain by spending time with God before the tabernacle. “We must always have courage. If some spiritual listlessness comes upon us, let us run to the feet of

Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, place ourselves in the midst of the heavenly perfumes, and we will undoubtedly regain our strength.”¹⁴

The Passion of Jesus, No Greater Love

Pio’s spirituality focused primarily on the passion of Christ. Pio encouraged all to embrace their sufferings, offering them to God for the salvation of souls, including their own. He wanted us to follow Paul’s example: “I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church” (Colossians 1:24).

True Holiness

Believing that true holiness was nurtured in a soul by the action of the Holy Spirit, Padre Pio encouraged his followers to remain open and humble, allowing God to work in their souls.

Holy Angels Smile at Us

Throughout his life, Padre Pio had visions of and conversations with his guardian angel. Pio said his guardian angel helped him to love and obey God, and he urged everyone to develop a relationship with their own holy angel.

Humility and Simplicity

Pio's spirituality stressed the need for humility and simplicity. "Be humble with others, since 'God opposes the proud and gives grace to the humble' (James 4:6). The more that graces and favors grow in your soul, the more you should humble yourself and always maintain the humility of our heavenly mother who, the very instant she became the mother of God, declared herself to be the servant and handmaid of the same God."¹⁵ Pio encouraged all to practice simplicity by becoming "like little children" (Matthew 18:3). He wanted all to follow Christ's example, who counted as nothing the riches, esteem, and values of this world.

Trusting Only in Jesus

Enduring almost-constant physical, emotional, and spiritual pain, Pio still placed all his trust and hope in Christ. "I do not know what will happen to me," said Pio. "I only know one thing for certain; the Lord will never fall short of his promises."¹⁶

Mary

Knowing from personal experience how Mary's heart ached for all of God's children still struggling against sin and evil, Pio said, "May this most dear mother unite us so closely with Jesus that we may never allow ourselves to be enraptured or lured away."¹⁷

Fear Not, Worry Not

Echoing Christ's own words not to be fearful or to worry (Luke 12:17, 22), Pio said, "Do not anticipate the problems of this life with apprehension, but rather with a perfect hope that God, to whom you belong, will free you from them accordingly. . . . He will help you in all events . . . so don't worry."¹⁸

Joy in the Lord

Knowing that believers could find joy in the love of God, Pio said, "Love has as its close relatives joy and peace. Joy is born of happiness at possessing what we love."¹⁹

PIO FOR TODAY

"Prayer," said Pio, "is the best weapon we have. It is a key that opens God's heart."²⁰ Using the meditations in this book, we can confidently embrace Pio as our spiritual mentor and as our guide in prayer.

On August 20, 2005, during World Youth Day, Pope Benedict XVI invited all youth to get to know Padre Pio so they could learn "what it is to adore and what it means to live according to the teaching of . . . Jesus Christ."²¹ As you pray through the meditations in this book, may you come to a greater understanding of Jesus and his teachings, and may that lead you to greater adoration of him each day.