



17-page section on St Pio begins here

Padre Pio: a man of prayer and suffering

It seems to be a fact," wrote Flannery O'Connor in July 1955, "that you have to suffer as much from the Church as for it but if you believe in the divinity of Christ, you have to cherish the world at the same time that you struggle to endure it."

The American author's words could have been penned with St Pio of Pietrelcina in mind, given how he not merely bore the wounds of Christ's passion but was frequently harassed and had his ministry restricted by Church authorities.

Padre Pio was on several occasions the subject of such treatment from emissaries of the Holy Office, the forerunner of today's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, prone then to acting, according to Cologne's Cardinal Josef Frings declared – advised by the young Fr Joseph Ratzinger – in a manner that was "a source of harm to the faithful and of scandal to those outside the Church".

Accusations

Things changed for St Pio with the accession to the papacy of Blessed Paul VI in 1963, with all accusations against the Italian Capuchin being quashed. St John Paul II visited his shrine in 1987,

beatifying him in 1999, and in 2002, describing how Padre Pio had been a true minister of Christ's mercy when he heard his Confession in 1947, the Polish Pope canonised him.

San Giovanni Rotondo, where Padre Pio practised his ministry for decades, has long been a place of pilgrimage for Catholics from Italy, Ireland, and further afield, and it was no accident that within days of launching the Year of Priests in 2009, Pope Benedict visited the shrine of St Pio there.

On Saturday last week Pope Francis followed in his predecessors' footsteps, not merely visiting the Capuchin's shrine, but also becoming also the first Pope to visit Padre Pio's birthplace in Pietrelcina and paying a suitable visit to the world-class hospital Padre Pio founded in San Giovanni to provide quality healthcare to the poor of Italy's impoverished south.

This is a fitting year for such a papal pilgrimage, with the centenary of Padre Pio's receipt of the stigmata falling in September, just days before the 50th anniversary of his death, and it was no surprise that Pope Francis made sure while there to urge Catholics to follow the example of the mystic who never lost faith in Christ and his Church.



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The man behind the mitten

Padre Pio was a priest with a worldwide following, Pope Paul VI told a gathering of Capuchin Chapter Fathers in 1971, not because he was a philosopher or especially wise or blessed with extensive resources he could use.

"No," he said, his fame arose "because he said Mass humbly, heard confessions from dawn to dusk and was – it is not easy to say it – one who bore the wounds of our Lord. He was a man of prayer and suffering."

St Pio of Pietrelcina was

Padre Pio lived a life of prayer and suffering, writes Greg Daly



born Francesco Forgione in 1887, the second of five children who lived beyond infancy born to Grazio Mario Forgione and Maria Giuseppa di Nunzio, peasant farmers in the small town of Pietrelcina

in the Campanian uplands, northeast of Naples.

By the time he was five, he later said, he had decided to dedicate his life to God; certainly he would refuse to play with children of his own age, claiming that they blasphemed. "I have never played in my life," he later confided sadly, adding that his father had often tried to encourage him to do so. "I was an insipid piece of macaroni, with neither salt nor sauce," he said.

He helped his parents, working on the land and looking after their small flock of sheep up to the age of 10.

The young Francesco received his first Holy Communion at the age of 11, as was normal then, being confirmed the following year. By this point he had already been drawn to the life of a friar after encountering a Capuchin 'on the quest' – seeking donations – and Capuchins at a nearby community in Morcone had



said they would be interested in his joining them, but that he would need to be better educated first.

Francesco's father went to the US in search of work, and sent money home to pay for private tutoring for his son, who attended lessons given by one Domenico Tizzani, a former priest who had left the priesthood so he could marry, and who taught him reading, writing, and a little Latin.

In January 1903, then aged 15, the young Francesco went to Morcone to enter the

novitiate of the Friars of the Capuchin Province of Foggia, taking the religious name of Pio some weeks afterwards and making simple profession as a friar a year later.

On his way to begin his studies as a friar, the young Fra Pio took ill, with his appetite dropping, insomnia, and exhaustion, accompanied by fainting spells, vomiting and migraines. His health worsened, and in 1905 his superiors moved him to a community in the mountains in the hope that the change of air would help.

“The sight of him frightened me: what I felt at that moment is indescribable”

It was to no avail, however, and so doctors advised that he be allowed continue his studies in his home town of Pietrelcina. He made solemn profession in the order there in 1907, and was ordained three years later in the Cathedral of Benevento, though due to his poor health he was, until 1916, allowed to live with his family.

September 1916 saw him being assigned to the seven-strong community of Our Lady of Grace in San Giovanni Rotondo in the Gargano Mountains where he would remain – save during a brief period of military service –

until his death in 1968.

The young Padre Pio had first been called up for military service in November 1915, assigned in early December to the 10th Medical Corps in Naples, but within a fortnight he had returned home on medical leave. The following December saw him resuming his assignment, but he was again released on medical leave within a fortnight.

August 1917 marked the beginning of his sole sustained period of military service, with him remaining in barracks until early November, when he again returned to San Giovanni on sick leave. His final period of military service began in early March 1918, but after 10 days he was discharged altogether. He would be plagued by illnesses for the rest of his life.

Some months later, after Mass on the morning of September 20, 1918, Padre Pio knelt alone before the cross in the Church of Our Lady of Grace in the town, withdrawing into himself in a peacefulness he later described as "similar to a sweet sleep", and prayed fervently.

A month later he wrote to his spiritual director, Padre Benedetto, describing what happened next.

"It all happened in a flash. While all this was taking place, I saw before me a mysterious person, similar to the one I had seen on August 5, differing only because his hands, feet and side were dripping blood," he wrote, alluding to a vision he had had some weeks earlier.

"The sight of him frightened me: what I felt at that moment is indescribable," he continued. "I thought I would die, and would have died if the Lord hadn't intervened and strengthened my heart which was about to burst out of my chest. The person disappeared and I became aware that my hands, feet and side were pierced and were dripping with blood."

The friar had received the stigmata, wounds corresponding to those Christ suffered on the Cross that were to bring him fame and notoriety over the coming decades, and that would stay with him almost until the very day he died, 50 years later.

This was not the young priest's first experience of visions, or indeed stigmata. In 1911 he wrote to Padre Benedetto, describing how a red mark had appeared overnight in the centre of his palms, accompanied by acute pain, with a similar pain also afflicting his feet, and in 1915 he told his friend Padre Agostino how he had had visions since his time as a novice, receiving 'invisible stigmata' years later.

Although he had sought to



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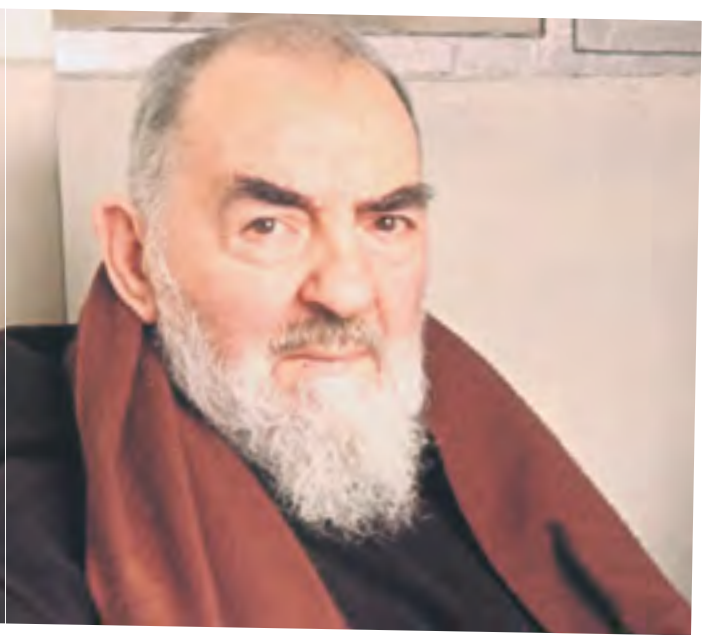


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share in Christ's passion in a profound way, Padre Pio had not sought this to be so apparent to others, and wrote in subsequent weeks about his wish that the marks would become invisible to others, as they were reputed to have done for some stigmatics in the past.

"I am dying of pain because of the wound and because of the resulting embarrassment which I feel deep within my soul," he wrote, expressing the hope that the visible marks be removed. "Will Jesus, who is so good, grant me this grace? Will he at least relieve me of the embarrassment which these outward signs cause me?"

Sufferings

Although he had said he wished his sufferings to be experienced in secret, and although the Capuchin Minister Provincial directed the friary's Guardian, Fr Paulino of Cascalenda, to "keep quiet and avoid publicity", it did not take long before reports began to draw attention to Padre Pio and San Giovanni's small Capuchin community. Rumours spread far and wide of miracles and other wonders linked with the friar in the months following the end of World War One, with the Spanish Flu raging across Italy and Padre Pio and his superior helping administer injections to help people fight the epidemic.

Once word of the phenomenon reached the newspapers, there was no keeping things quiet, and aside from the crowds that descended on the small town in the Gargano Mountains, the attention of scientists and doctors was also aroused.

Sceptical about the whole affair, the Capuchin authorities called on a succession of doctors over the course of 1919 to look into what was happening: first Dr Luigi Romanelli, the head physician of the hospital in Barletta; then Prof. Amici Bignami, head of the University of Rome's pathology department; then Dr Luigi Festa, who

would go on to treat Padre Pio over the years; and finally in July 1920 Dr Romanelli and Dr Festa together.

"In the palm of Padre Pio's left hand, almost corresponding to the middle of the third metacarpus, I discovered the existence of an anatomical lesion of the tissue, in a more or less circular form, with clean edges, having a diameter of approximately 2cm. This lesion appeared then, as it now appears, to be covered by a reddish brown scab," wrote Dr Festa.

"During my visit, in order to observe well the lesions of his feet, I helped him, myself, to remove his socks. They were completely drenched with a bloody serum. On the back of both feet, precisely in correspondence to the second metacarpus, I perceived a reddish brown circular lesion, covered by a soft scab which looked exactly like the ones on his hands," he continued.

“Once word of the phenomenon reached the newspapers, there was no keeping things quiet”

"On the anterior region of the left thorax, under the papilla, Padre Pio showed us another lesion in the form of an upside-down cross. It measured about 7cm in length," he added of the wound in the friar's side. "None of the surrounding tissues showed any trace of redness or edema. However, there was a more intense and more extensive hypersensitivity to pain in that area than in the normal tissues surrounding the other lesions."

While the doctors who examined the wounds could not agree on their cause, their reality continued to generate attention, especially as rumours spread of a beautiful fragrance associated with the wounds, of gifts of healing and prophecy and the ability to read the hearts of those who wished to speak with

them. Others spoke even of bilocation and levitation.

Reactions to this varied wildly among Church authorities.

Cardinal Pietro Gasparri, the Vatican's Secretary of State, recommended some people to him and requested Padre Pio's prayers for the Pope and himself, and Archbishop Edward Kenealy OFM Cap. of Simla in India even came to visit his fellow Capuchin in early 1920, with other leading prelates to come in subsequent months.

The local bishop, Manfredonia's Archbishop Pasquale Gagliardi, however, suspected fraud, believing the Capuchin community was trying to profit from the affair, and then after Pius XI succeeded Benedict XV a similarly dubious attitude became more prevalent in Rome, with a succession of strictures being placed upon the friar.

The Vatican publicly cast doubt on the possibility that Padre Pio's wounds had any kind of divine origin, and after briefly meeting the friar on one occasion, without being able to examine the stigmata, the Franciscan founder of Milan's Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Agostino Gemelli, declared him "an ignorant and self-mutilating psychopath who exploited people's credulity".

In 1933, however, the tide began to turn, with the Pope directing that the ban on Padre Pio's public celebration of Mass be rescinded, and with the friar being given honorary permission the following year to preach, despite not having a formal license to do so. On acceding to the papacy in 1939, Pope Pius XII encouraged people to visit the Capuchin.

During this period Padre Pio continued to be embarrassed by his condition – in time he would accept it with more confidence – and most photographs show him wearing mittens or coverings on his hands and feet where the bleeding occurred. It was against the background of Italy's invasion of Albania in 1939 and entry into the Second World War in 1940 that Padre Pio began plans to open a hospital in San Giovanni Rotondo, but the Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza, the 'Home to relieve suffering' was not to open until 1956.

In the meantime, the friar's popularity continued to grow, with 1947 – the year the young Karol Wojtyla, the future Pope St John Paul II, would visit him for Confession – seeing one of the most famous miracles associated with him.

Gemma di Giorgi had been born in the Sicilian town of Ribera on Christmas day, 1939, with eyes that were diagnosed as having no pupils

– there was no way light could enter them, and it would be impossible for her to see, with there being no medical cure for the condition.

A relative of her parents who was a nun advised her parents to contact Padre Pio, and was in turn asked by Gemma's grandmother to write a letter to the friar to tell him of Gemma's condition.

“The Vatican publicly cast doubt on the possibility that Padre Pio's wounds had any kind of divine origin”

After sending the letter, the nun had a dream where Padre Pio appeared, asking to see the girl for whom "so many prayers are being offered that they are almost deafening", with him making the sign of the cross over Gemma's eyes and promising his prayers after she was presented to him.

The nun received a reply to her letter the following day and urged Gemma's parents to take their daughter to visit the friar.

Gemma and her grandmother set out, and on the

way Gemma told her mother she could see the sea and a ship.

When they reached San Giovanni, they were met by Padre Pio who promptly greeted Gemma, and heard her confession, touching her eyes with his wounded hand and drawing the sign of the cross upon her. Years later she described how she had opened her eyes then, seen the bearded priest, and began to cry.

Upset that Gemma had not asked for healing, Gemma's grandmother asked the friar to hear her confession, and pleaded for Gemma to be helped see.

"Do you have faith, my daughter? The child must not weep and neither must you for the child sees, and you know she sees," he replied, alluding to how she had spoken of seeing a ship on the sea on the way there.

Still without pupils, the Italian government considers Gemma legally blind to this day, though she walks about unaided. "I see with the eyes of God, not the eyes of my body" she told people in the Philippines in 2003, declaring: "God has put Padre Pio like a radiant light for our century."

In 1956, a year in which the

friar was left bedridden with exudative pleuritis for four months, the hospital he had planned since 1956 opened, with the help of a grant of \$325,000 from the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA).

The following year Pius XII granted Padre Pio dispensation from his vow of poverty so that he might directly supervise the hospital project, but the friar's detractors used this as another weapon with which to attack him, charging him with misappropriation of funds and spreading rumours that led to a new wave of Vatican investigations and renewed restraints on his ministry and even on his relations with other friars.

The accession of Blessed Paul VI to the papacy in 1963 changed everything, however. All accusations were dismissed and Padre Pio was free at last to celebrate his ministry fully and openly in his final years, drawing vast crowds to San Giovanni Rotondo and inspiring people throughout the world.

In 1999, 31 years after the friar's death, he was beatified, and in 2002 Pope St John Paul II canonised him as a saint of the Church.

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Pope: Like Padre Pio, keep its troubles, our sins'



Pope Francis passes an image of St Pio as he celebrates Mass at the Shrine of St Pio of Pietrelcina in San Giovanni Rotondo, Italy. Photos: CNS



Pope Francis visits the small room in which St Pio lived.



Pope Francis greets the crowd after celebrating Mass at the Shrine of St Pio of Pietrelcina.



The Pope leaves a chapel at the Shrine of St Pio of Pietrelcina.



Above and left, Pope Francis greets patients as he visits children in the cancer ward of the hospital St Pio founded, Casa Solievo della Sofferenza.

loving the Church 'despite



The Capuchin saint shocked the world by dedicating his life wholly to God, writes Claire Giangravè

During a visit on Saturday, March 17, to the southern Italian town of Pietrelcina, the birthplace of Padre Pio, and San Giovanni Rotondo, where the famous Capuchin stigmatic friar lived for more than 50 years, Pope Francis invited the faithful to imitate the saint and continue loving the Church, "despite its troubles, our sins".

The Pope broke safety protocols by walking among the thousands of people, many coming from all over the world, gathered in the town's main square to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Padre Pio's death and the 100th anniversary of his receiving the stigmata.

After visiting briefly a chapel containing an elm tree



Pope Francis prays in front of the remains of St Pio in the Church of Santa Maria delle Grazie at the Shrine of St Pio of Pietrelcina in San Giovanni.



Pope Francis burns incense as he celebrates Mass at the Shrine of St Pio of Pietrelcina.

under which Padre Pio would usually pray, the Pope spoke to the crowd.

Padre Pio "loved the Church, with all its troubles, our sins. We are all sinners, we are ashamed, but God's Spirit gave us this Church, which is Holy. And St Pio loved this Church," Francis said, adding in an off-the-cuff remark that the saint "never denied his country, remember, he never denied his origins, he never denied his family".

While Francis did not cite

any specific problems or sins, his words come at a time when the Pontiff himself is facing mounting criticism for his handling of the clerical sexual abuse scandals in Catholicism, focusing on the case of a Chilean bishop accused of covering up abuse by the country's most notorious paedophile priest.

In saying that Padre Pio loved the Church despite its sins, Francis may have had in mind the stigmatic saint's own troubled history with

Church authorities during his lifetime.

Forerunner

Between 1916 and 1968, the year he died, Padre Pio was investigated by the Holy Office, the forerunner of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, somewhere between 12 and 25 times, depending on how one counts. At various points, he was forbidden from saying Mass in public, from publishing, from receiving visitors,

and even from talking to women alone.

Despite that harassment, the eventual judgment of the Church was positive, as Padre Pio was beatified under Pope St John Paul II in 1999 and canonised in 2002.

The Pope proved to be familiar with the Capuchin saint. During Francis's time as the Archbishop of Buenos Aires, prayer groups on Padre Pio began surfacing all over the world, including South America, and a statue and relic of the saint can be found in the Cathedral of Buenos Aires.

“If one of you gets the desire to talk ill of another, bite your tongue... it will be good for the soul”

"This humble Capuchin friar shocked the world with his life, by entirely dedicating himself to prayer and by patiently listening to his brothers, on whose suffering he would pour the balm of Christ's charity," Francis said, inviting faithful to "imitate his heroic example and his virtue" so as to become instruments of Christ's love for the weakest.

"At the same time, on account of his unconditional loyalty to the Church, you will be a witness to communion, because only communion, that is always being united in peace between us, the communion between us, edifies and builds," he said.

According to some observers and local media outlets, the Pope's remarks could be seen, in part, as a reflection on the divided and paralysed political situation that has emerged in Italy after elections in early March.

"A country that fights every day scares people, it's a sick and sad country...a country where everyone loves one another, more or less, and don't wish each other harm, grows, grows, grows."

"It becomes wider and it becomes strong," he said.

He asked those gathered and watching to "not waste time fighting amongst each other", which is the only way to move and to walk forward.

"Please, peace among you, communion among you, and if one of you gets the desire to talk ill of another, bite your tongue," he said, continuing, "it will be good for the soul and for the country as well."

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Pope Francis greets patients (above) and staff members dressed as clowns (right) as he visits the cancer ward of the Casa Solievo della Sofferenza (House for the Relief of Suffering) hospital.

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Francis underlined that in September 1911, Padre Pio came to Pietrelcina to “breathe some fresher air” since his body had weakened. He added that “it was not an easy time” for the Capuchin, who was “strongly tormented within” and thought the devil was attacking him.

“The devil doesn’t give peace, because he moves. Do you believe that the devil exists?” Francis asked the crowd in an unscripted remark. “He exists, he comes within us, he tricks us, and Padre Pio feared that the devil would take over him, and push him toward sin,” he said.

Through Mass and prayer, Padre Pio reached “an elevated level of union with the Lord”, Francis said, referring to the “the special mystical gifts” that connected the saint with the signs of Christ’s passion.

“The smallness... refers to the fact that Jesus privileged the little ones in revealing the mysteries of his Kingdom”

“I hope this territory will draw from the life teachings of Padre Pio in this difficult moment like the present, while the population progressively diminishes and ages because many young people are forced to go elsewhere to find work,” he added.

The Pope pointed to the “grave problem” of the internal migration of youth, where many university students in the poorer, unemployed South of Italy leave their cities and towns to study or work in the north.

He asked that Padre Pio intercede to offer youth “concrete possibilities for a future

of hope”, and invited all to offer attention and tenderness to old people.

“I would like it if one day they gave a Nobel Prize to old people, who give memory to humanity,” Francis said, off-script. “Don’t marginalise old people. No, no, old people are wisdom. May old people learn to speak to youth, and may youth learn to speak to old people. Speak to them!” he added.

After his visit to Pietrelcina, the first time a Pontiff had visited the town, Francis took a helicopter ride to San Giovanni Rotondo, site of the hospital and sanctuary ‘House of Relief of Suffering’, founded by the famous stigmatic saint in 1956 and considered one of the most efficient health care facilities in Italy and Europe.

There the Pope spent some time with medical personnel and children in the oncology department, before moving to the sanctuary of St Mary of the Graces, where he met with the Capuchin community of San Giovanni Rotondo and then prayed before the remains of Padre Pio.

The final stop was the Mass, where during the homily, Francis referred to Padre Pio as “an apostle of the confessional” who beckons faithful to engage and communicate with God. He pointed to the “three visible signs” left by the saint in the prayer groups, the sick in the ‘House of Relief’ and the confessional, which remind us of “the three precious heirlooms: prayer, smallness and wisdom of life”.

Motivated

Concerning prayer, the Pope asked whether Catholics pray enough, and if they do, if it’s motivated by need or an actual desire to speak to God. “St Pio, 50 years after his going to Heaven, helps us, because he left us the heredity of prayer,” he said.

“Do our prayers resem-

ble those of Jesus or are they reduced and salutary emergency calls? Or do we mean them as tranquilisers to be taken in regular doses, in order to get some stress relief?” the Pope asked. “No, prayer is an act of love, it’s being with God and bringing him the life of the world: it’s an indispensable work of spiritual mercy.”

The smallness, Francis said, refers to the fact that Jesus privileged the little ones in revealing the mysteries of his Kingdom. “The little ones are those who have a humble and open heart, poor and needy, who feel the need to pray, to give themselves and let themselves be accompanied,” he said.

Interference

The Pope compared the little ones to “an antenna that captures the signal of God”, whereas those who think themselves to be “big” create “an enormous interference”.

Finally, when it comes to wisdom, the Pope said it should not be confused with great abilities or great power. “The only knowing and powerful weapon is charity animated by faith, because it has the power to disarm the forces of evil,” Francis said. “Saint Pio fought evil for his entire life and fought it wisely like the Lord: with humility, obedience, the cross, offering his suffering for love.”

While many admire the friar, the Pope said, few follow his example, the same way many “are willing to put a ‘like’ on the [Facebook] page of the great saints”, but few live like them.

“Christian life is not ‘I like’, but an ‘I give’,” Francis said. “Life perfumes when it’s offered as a gift; it becomes flavourless when it’s kept to oneself.”

❶ Claire Giangravè is a contributing editor to Cruxnow.com



Pope Francis arrives to celebrate Mass at the Shrine of St Pio of Pietrelcina.



Staff show Pope Francis around the wards of the Casa Solievo della Sofferenza (House for the Relief of Suffering) hospital.



Padre Pio was far from the only saint to have borne stigmata, writes **Greg Daly**

God," Pope Francis reminds us in *Amoris Laetitia*, "allows parents to choose the name by which he himself will call their child for all eternity."

For all that we think of St Pio of Pietrelcina by his religious name of Pio or Pius, it's perhaps more important that he was baptised as Francesco, named after Italy's patron saint, St Francis of Assisi and the first person we know of to have borne the stigmata – the marks of Christ's passion.

It's a curious coincidence that the most famous Christian in living memory to have borne the marks of Christ's passion bore the same name of the first Christian to have done so. Stigmata seem unheard of until the 13th Century, when St Francis reportedly received them during a vision in September 1224 while fasting on Mount La Verna.

"It would seem that St Francis beheld the heavens above him occupied by a vast winged being like a seraph spread out like a cross," wrote G.K. Chesterton in his popular 1923 biography of the saint, detailing in passionate terms Francis' experience of receiving the stigmata.

Unthinkable power

"St Francis saw above him, filling the whole heavens, some vast immemorial unthinkable power, ancient like the Ancient of Days, whose calm men had conceived under the form of winged bulls or monstrous cherubim, and all that winged wonder was in pain like a wounded bird. This seraphic suffering, it is said, pierced his soul with a sword of grief and pity; it may be inferred that some sort of mounting agony accompanied the ecstasy," wrote Chesterton.

"Finally after some fashion the apocalypse faded from the sky and the agony within subsided; and silence and the natural air filled the morning twilight and settled slowly in the purple chasms and cleft abysses of the Apennines," he

Mirrors of Christ



The stigmata of St Francis, as depicted by Giotto.

continued in a chapter aptly entitled 'The Mirror of Christ'. "The head of the solitary sank, amid all that relaxation and quiet in which time can drift by with the sense of something ended and complete; and as he stared downwards, he saw the marks of nails in his own hands."

Thomas of Celano described these marks six years later in the first biography of the saint, written just four years after Francis' death.

"His wrists and feet seemed to be pierced by nails, with the heads of the nails appearing on his wrists and on the upper sides of his feet, the points appearing on the other side.

"The marks were round on the palm of each hand but elongated on the other side, and small pieces of flesh jutting out from the rest took on the appearance of the nail-ends, bent and driven back," he wrote.

“Until the 20th Century no priest had ever claimed to have stigmata”

"In the same way the marks of the nails were impressed on his feet and projected beyond the rest of his flesh," he continued. "Moreover, the right side had a large wound as if it had been pierced with a spear, and it often bled so that his tunic and trousers were soaked with his sacred blood."

Since St Francis received the stigmata that autumn morning, hundreds of people have claimed to have miraculously received the stigmata, the term coming from a Greek word meaning 'mark', 'tattoo', or 'brand', as used by St Paul in Galatians 6:17 when he says "I carry the marks of

Jesus branded on my body".

Many of the stigmatists who followed St Francis were doubtless fraudulent, and one – a 16th-Century Franciscan sister in Spain called Magdalena de la Cruz – admitted at the end of her life that her stigmata had been fake. Tried by the Inquisition, she was sentenced to do penance in her convent for the rest of her life.

“Stigmata appear as wounds in believers' palms and upon the tops of their feet”

Most stigmatics, curiously, have been women, and while male stigmatics include such luminaries as St John of God, these were outnumbered by roughly seven to one up to the start of the 20th Century. Famous female stigmatics include St Catherine of Siena, St Rita of Cascia, St Catherine de Ricci, Blessed Lucy of Narni, St Veronica Giuliani, Blessed Anne Catherine Emmerich, and St Gemma Galgani.

While many stigmatics were members of religious orders and although Francis himself was an ordained deacon, it's striking too that stigmatics have tended not to be ordained – indeed, until the 20th Century no priest had ever claimed to have stigmata.

Claims of stigmata have, of course, been met with attempts at natural rather than supernatural explanations.

In the case of St Francis, for example, such theories have included speculation that his wounds were the result of having contracted leprosy, or that he suffered from quartan malaria which

“Many of the stigmatists who followed St Francis were doubtless fraudulent, and one admitted at the end of her life that her stigmata had been fake”

about his wounds ranged from claims that they were straightforwardly fraudulent to ones that they were due to auto-suggestion; other cases of stigmata have been, sceptics have suggested, due to self-mutilation in dissociative mental states.

Against this, of course, supernatural possibilities continue to exist, but even then an obvious question concerns why stigmata – if understood as reflections or expressions of the Passion wounds of Christ – are almost invariably 'wrong'.

Typically, after all, stigmata appear as wounds in believers' palms and upon the tops of their feet, perhaps also with a wound in their side – where the Roman soldier pierced Our Lord with his spear to ensure he was dead.

Tradition

However, despite centuries of artistic tradition, it is now known that Roman crucifixions generally entailed nailing through not the palms but the forearms of their victims, with the nail passing between the radius and ulna, near the wrist, and indeed at least

sometimes entailed driving nails sideways through the ankle: a heelbone transfixed by a nail, found in Jerusalem's Ossuary of Yehohanan, now in the Israel Museum, is the sole piece of archaeological evidence for Roman crucifixions.

For some, the obvious answer would be that in cases of auto-suggestion or indeed fraud, of course stigmatics would be marked where they thought Christ's wounds had been – they had been well taught by many centuries of Christian iconography.

Others, though, might consider that when God speaks he appears to do so in words and images that people understand: when St Bernadette met Our Lady, for example, she did not meet an Aramaic-speaking Palestinian peasant, but someone who spoke her own Occitan dialect, while encountering her the following year in rural Wisconsin the Belgian Adele Brise experienced her as a fair-skinned lady with blonde hair.

The mysteries of God are beyond us, after all, but it is hardly beyond his power to communicate with us in languages – including visual ones – that we can understand.

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Irish links to the famous Capuchin date back to the 1920s, writes Colm Keane

To the Irish setting out for San Giovanni Rotondo in the 1950s, it must have felt like the ultimate pilgrimage. They first travelled long journeys by air in old prop planes. They then wound their way by slow trains and battered old buses as they climbed into the remote and inhospitable Gargano Mountains in the spur of Italy. Walking up the final stretch of dirt track, tired and hungry, they arrived at the isolated 16th-Century friary of Our Lady of Grace on the outskirts of San Giovanni Rotondo.

It was unlike any other journey these Irish pilgrims had undertaken before. What took them so long was the sheer magnitude of the trip. In those days, Italy seemed a world away, cut off not only by distance but by the high costs of travel.

Outings to Lough Derg and Knock were the height of it. For some people, however, religious conviction was a compelling force. Their search for spiritual meaning brought them to Padre Pio.

Visitors

One of the earliest Irish visitors was a Dublin woman, Mairead Doyle. In later life, she recalled how, on her 1950s visit, she travelled on mule tracks, with mud up to her ears. Her first act was to visit the friar's 5am Mass. "She was very taken with his spirituality," her niece, Mary Briody, recalls. "She said you couldn't take your eyes off the altar during Mass. She said that his eyes seemed to penetrate through you. She made herself known and then she got in to see Padre Pio."

Following that visit, Mairead became a personal friend of the stigmatic and dedicated herself to promoting him in Ireland. She travelled the country, showing films.

She also set up prayer groups, the first being established in 1970. She ran two pilgrimages a year to San Giovanni, and that was on

top of her work as a lecturer in shorthand and typing in Dublin.

She also sought a cure from the friar. "When my sister Deirdre, who was the youngest in the family, was born she had three cerebral haemorrhages," Mary Briody recalls. "The doctors didn't give her any hope. Mairead had this relic of Padre Pio at the time and she put the relic on my sister and sent a telegram to San Giovanni. Of course, Deirdre did get better. So Mairead wrote to, or sent a telegram to, Padre Pio and said she would bring my sister over when she was four. Padre Pio's reply was, 'I've already been with Deirdre!'"

Mary O'Connor, from Cork, also visited Padre Pio in the 1950s. She was seeking a blessing for her young son. "He gave me his hands to kiss, he put his hands on my head and he put his hands on my boy," Mary, who was deeply moved by her meeting with the friar, recollected.

"I looked into his face and I got an awful fright. He looked supernatural. He was different from any other living being I have ever seen. He literally shone and his eyes were remarkable. He was pale-featured, but he had a glowing expression.

"The whole thing had a huge effect on me. I was so startled that I handed over the child to my husband and I ran out of the church. I ran down the hill and I was hysterical. I worried that I had offended God all my life. I felt, 'If God is anything like Padre Pio, how could I have ever offended him?'"

* * * * *

It was inevitable that accounts of miracles would soon surface in the Irish press. The first was reported by Mona Hanafin, from Thurles. In 1964, she travelled to San Giovanni Rotondo with one aim in mind: to save her life. She was seriously ill, having just been diagnosed with cancer.

A long series of hospital stays and medical interventions had failed to resolve her problem, and time was running out. With a major operation pending, Mona decided to place her life in the hands of Padre Pio.

"We were all lined up on either side of the pews and I was at the altar rails," she recalled of her meeting with the stigmatic. "Padre Pio was



Padre Pio celebrating his last Mass which was attended by many Irish pilgrims.

going to pass up through us all. The custom was that he would give you his hand and you would kiss it. I was looking at him and saying in my mind, 'If you think I'm good enough would you put your hand on my head and bless me.' He did."

Explanation

Although there was no instant cure, contrary to all expectations Mona not only recovered but, once back in Ireland, her doctor discovered that her cancer was gone. He was baffled and could offer no explanation. An operation, he said, was no longer necessary. At the time of this author's last discussion with Mona, well over half a century later, the cancer had not come back.

Although these women were the first Irish people to undertake individual pilgrimages to Padre Pio, they weren't the first Irish people to meet him. The Dublin-born Vatican diplomat Dr Paschal Robinson was most likely the first to encounter him in the 1920s. Many Americans with strong Irish roots – including his lifelong devotee, Mary Pyle – also made his acquaintance in earlier decades. In particular, Irish soldiers who fought with the Allies during World War II paid visits to the friary at San Giovanni.

Among those travelling up the dirt track was a young Belfast-born chaplain by the name of Fr P. Hamilton Pollock. Attached to the Royal Air

Force during World War II, he had ended up with Bomber Command near the town of Foggia, just seven miles from San Giovanni Rotondo. From there the Allies consolidated their advance up through Italy on their way to Rome.

One day, in 1943, an RAF medical officer mentioned to Fr Pollock that Padre Pio was living nearby. The following week, on a duty-call to San Giovanni, he decided to visit the local church to pray. On entering, he noticed that one other person was inside, deep in contemplation. "His cowed head was inclined forward, his hands buried deep in the loose sleeves of his habit," he later recalled.

“Like Fr Pollock, John McCaffery too became a personal friend of Padre Pio. They would talk together, share jokes”

Quietly walking up the church, Fr Pollock approached the robed figure to ask where he might find Padre Pio. He tapped him twice on the shoulder but there was no reply. A third time he tapped and this time the figure slowly looked up, his concentration broken but his eyes still blank. It was clear to Fr Pollock that he was in the presence of someone who was “not of this earth....very far removed from this world”. He instantly

knew it was Padre Pio.

Over the next two and a half decades, Fr Pollock became one of Padre Pio's closest personal friends and visited him on many occasions. He also brought news of the future saint back to Ireland, encouraging others to travel to see him. Among those who visited was the Donegal-based former wartime spymaster, John McCaffery, who had headed up the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) in Bern during World War II.

Born in Scotland to Donegal parents, McCaffery had recruited resistance fighters in occupied countries, organised sabotage campaigns, and collected intelligence during the war. Like Fr Pollock, he too became a personal friend of Padre Pio. They would talk together, share jokes; at times even sit in the same stall together in the choir-loft of the church. McCaffery was soon given the privilege of entering the monastery on his own and without special permission. He was also afforded the honour of serving at Padre Pio's Masses on seven occasions.

McCaffery believed he received a cure through Padre Pio's intercession. Since his wartime exploits, he had suffered serious heart trouble, involving palpitations, head pain and a partial stroke.

During a Mass in San Giovanni, he mentally begged Padre Pio to help him avoid

another stroke, which he feared to be imminent. After the Mass, Padre Pio held McCaffery's head in his hands and pressed it against the wound in his side. He did the same again on two further occasions. No heart trouble was ever experienced again by McCaffery.

Despite the Irish visits to Padre Pio in the 1940s and '50s, it wasn't until the package tour revolution of the 1960s that Irish people visited en masse. Suddenly, all-in, cut-price pilgrimages were on offer, most of them organised by Joe Walsh Tours. Throughout the decade, the company ferried thousands of Irish people to Rome and onwards to Padre Pio. With employment booming and emigration falling, people had the money to pay for the new form of travel.

They attended Padre Pio's Masses, witnessed his stigmata and received his blessing. Although the friar was ageing fast, all who met him or saw him were left with indelible memories.

* * * * *

Tom Cooney, from County Clare, was one of those fortunate enough not only to be blessed by the future saint but to kiss his wounded hand. He waited along with 27 other men in a room in the monastery. It was 'men only', he was told, in keeping with the rule of the friary. The men knelt there nervously, their voices subdued, each one hoping that



he might be singled out by the friar. An atmosphere of anticipation preceded the event.

"There was a great feeling of holiness there," Tom said of the arrival of Padre Pio in the room. "He was a man that could read your mind and soul. He walked past each one of us. There was no ceremony. He just stood for a

second before everyone, and everybody touched his habit. I was the only one he handed the wounded hand to, to kiss. I didn't say anything to him; I was just thanking God to be in the one room with him. I couldn't have asked for more."

A tour party of 83 Irish pilgrims were also present around the time of Padre Pio's

death. They had been among the last to attend his Masses, receive his blessing and be greeted individually by the friar. They were returning to Rome when the news of his death was announced. The late Kay Thornton, who was with the Irish party, came back to San Giovanni, travelling via Foggia on the over-



night train.

"I was determined to go back, although most people stayed in Rome," Kay reflected. "I kissed him laid out in the coffin. It was unbelievable how many people were there. You couldn't move with the people. People were queuing night and day to pass the coffin."

"There were so many coming, and the doors had to be closed for the funeral. The people nearly went crazy because they couldn't get in. It was very moving. It was very special to have been there."

* * * * *

Cork woman Mary O'Connor, who we heard from earlier, had arrived in San Giovanni a few hours before Padre Pio died. She was with her husband Dan and their children, plus some other young children, too. "The only thing I said was, 'He's suffered so much and he's gone to heaven!'," Mary recollected. Dan said: "Let's get the children up and dress them and we'll go up to the church and

see what's happening." Padre Pio's body was already there, in his coffin, up in the altar area.

"I then said to Dan, 'Would you stay with the children? I want to get nearer to Padre Pio.' I went to the back of the altar and I got in. As I got there, they were changing the candles on the coffin. I asked the priest: 'Would you mind giving me one of the candles?' He gave one to me. Pieces of it have gone all over the world."

On Thursday, September 26, 1968, 60,000 people lined the streets as the body of Padre Pio was borne through San Giovanni.

The entire town shut down. Black-bordered flags flew at half mast. Hundreds of veiled women, dressed in black, knelt as the open hearse bearing the coffin passed by. The body was eventually placed in the crypt of the church of Santa Maria delle Grazie.

“A tour party of 83 Irish pilgrims were also present around the time of Padre Pio's death. They had been among the last to attend his Masses”

Kay Thornton, who had remained in San Giovanni through those final days, was deeply touched. "You never forget Padre Pio," she told me. "There was never anyone like him before. He suffered dreadfully all his life. Every

single moment of his life he was suffering from those bleeding wounds and they were so sore. He must have been a special person even to survive that.

"He was a profound man, like nobody I ever met. I am a very lucky person to have met him. He once put his hand on my head and that was the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me. He lets you know when you are not pleasing him and then he helps you when you do something right. He is always with you, he is always there."

Perhaps we should leave the final words to Mona Hanafin, that wonderful Tipperary woman whose cure followed her visit to San Giovanni and who later worked tirelessly on the saint's behalf in Ireland.

"Following his death he was such a loss," she concluded. "His whole life was dedicated to saving souls. He was a tireless confessor. You had St Francis and St Anthony but in our times of trouble you had Padre Pio. He was special, he was just sent to us for our time. And why did he do it?"

"He didn't do it for himself; he did it for us, for mankind. I definitely regard him as the greatest mystic ever."

Colm Keane has published 27 books, including seven number one bestsellers, among them Padre Pio: The Scent of Roses, Padre Pio: The Irish Connection, and his most recent book Padre Pio: Irish Encounters with the Saint, published by Capel Island Press, retailing for €14.99.

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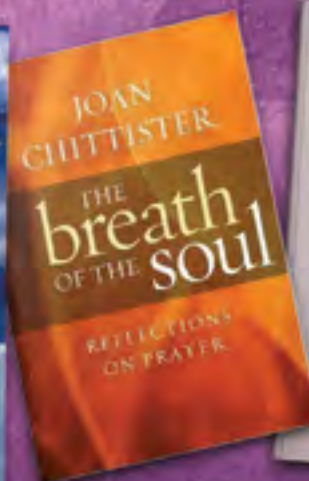
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Family saved by a saint

In a near-death experience a holidaying Irish family of seven crashed onto a motorway after losing control of their car in the US.

Tumbling down an embankment after swerving to avoid another motorist, Cavan man Martin McBreen said the accident could have been "horrific".

The family were on the road to a friend's house in Texas at about 1.30am and had just turned off the motorway when a car "came out of nowhere" causing Mr McBreen to send his vehicle crashing onto a road where lorries frequently drive at 80kmh.

A fire brigade, six police cars and an ambulance arrived at the scene.

Did Padre Pio's intercession save a family of seven, asks Chai Brady



"If we just came out at the wrong time...to come out of it and not so much as a scrape on any of us, listen somebody is looking out for us and we feel that he is a part of it," said Mr McBreen, who believes Padre Pio interceded, once again, to protect his family.

His wife Sinead had brought her Padre Pio sticker with them, with Mr McBreen saying "miraculously we all survived without a scratch, so he's definitely looking after us".

This is not the first time something miraculous has occurred for the McBreens, who were once told one of their children had no chance of survival.

When she was 16 weeks pregnant Martin's wife, Sinead, was informed by medical staff in a Dublin hospital after a routine scan that her unborn child had little chance of survival.

The scans revealed their baby had a form of hydrops that meant it was bloated to a

point that she was likened to the Michelin Man by doctors, with further tests showing the child had Down syndrome but would not live to be born anyway as the baby was full of fluid that would cause her heart to stop.

The couple were advised to go to England to have an abortion.

"They said not to think of it as an abortion but 'as a medical management of your pregnancy'. Our belief is and always has been, these decisions are not ours to make and we didn't go along with what they were saying," Mr McBreen said, adding that throughout her pregnancy Sinead was consistently "pressured" to have an abortion by medical staff.

A gift

However, he said Sinead felt that every extra day she was pregnant was a gift, and still held out hope, even after choosing a cemetery spot for their unborn child.

"I couldn't understand the rationale behind it, to abort a baby because she wasn't going to survive," Sinead told *The Irish Catholic* in a previous interview.

"I kept saying, and I remember the last time saying it, 'Can we not just end this conversation for good? I'm not going down that road. I know what I'm facing isn't nice, but to me it is the only option.' I said, 'God will decide what day, what hour, and what minute this baby is going to stop living, and only he can decide. I couldn't - how can anybody? If she's going to die anyway, well, let it be natural. Let her get every chance. I want to give the baby every chance,'" she added.

This continued for weeks with doctors saying they couldn't understand how their child was still alive.

"A mutual friend of ours told us about Padre Pio's glove, and said that it would be useful to visit," Mr McBreen said.

"My mother has always been a great believer in Padre Pio. In my family I've got three brothers and three sisters and Padre Pio is the first sticker put in every car we had, she always said he protects us."

Shortly after visiting the relic of Padre Pio, the night before her weekly scan, Sinead had a dream about the saint holding her baby. When she woke she believed that Padre Pio had her baby and



Grace.

would look after it.

Arriving at the hospital they thought they would be told the heartbeat had stopped. Instead the obstetrician was amazed, telling them: "I can't see anything wrong."

The hospital maintained that the baby had a fatal heart problem, and the McBreen's should not get their hopes up, but on November 12, 2014, Grace was born, with Down syndrome as predicted - but perfectly healthy.

Sinead organises sending a gift basket to all mothers who give birth to a Down syndrome child in Ireland

Mr McBreen decried the high rates of unborn children with Down syndrome being aborted in other countries, many of which are said to be incompatible with life. In Denmark 98% of fetuses diagnosed with Down syndrome are aborted, the figure stands at 90% in England and there has not been a baby born with Down syndrome in Iceland for the past five years.

According to Mr McBreen this points to a belief that Down syndrome children

don't have a right to life.

"At a time when you have early intervention and outcomes for people with disabilities have never been better, then on the other hand we're singling them out and discriminating that they shouldn't have a chance at life at all and that to me is just wrong in every sense you look at it and it needs to be highlighted," he said.

"The actual existence of people with Down syndrome is being threatened." Both Sinead and Martin have been publicly vocal advocates of retaining the Eighth Amendment in the upcoming referendum expected to be held in May.

The couple are setting up a Down syndrome centre in Carrickmascross with a group, and Sinead organises sending a gift basket to all mothers who give birth to a Down syndrome child in Ireland through the Facebook page 'The Perfect Gift'.

To this day Mr McBreen thanks Padre Pio for his intercession in the birth of his youngest daughter Grace who is now three-years-old, and now more recently in October last year for keeping them safe after their traffic accident in Texas.

"He's looking out for us at the moment, he thinks we have something more to do I think," he added.



23rd Eucharistic Loreto Vigil

Blessed Sacrament Chapel, Knock Shrine

To celebrate the Feast of the Annunciation of the Lord and to Pray for the World Meeting of Families, 2018

Saturday 24 March, 2018

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8.30pm-11.30pm

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Mass at 11.30pm

Celebrant: Fr Brendan Walsh, SAC
Music by Úna Nolan, Director of Music, Knock

Vigil Intentions

- TO PRAY FOR THE WELLBEING OF POPE FRANCIS AND HIS INTENTIONS
- TO PRAY FOR THE SPIRITUAL SUCCESS OF THE UPCOMING WORLD MEETING OF FAMILIES IN DUBLIN
- TO PRAY FOR AN END TO LEGALISED ABORTION WORLDWIDE AND FOR THE PROTECTION OF IRELAND AND THE EIGHTH AMENDMENT
- TO CELEBRATE AND PRAY FOR THE GIFT OF LIFE FROM CONCEPTION TO NATURAL DEATH
- TO PRAY FOR AN END TO PORNOGRAPHY AND THE PROTECTION OF CHILDREN AND GIRLS FROM HUMAN TRAFFICKING
- TO PRAY FOR VICTIMS OF ALL PSYCHOLOGICAL ILLNESSES

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A saint of our time



Colm Fitzpatrick speaks with the director of an Irish St Pio charity

With devotion to Padre Pio still continuing to grow, one woman is providing an opportunity for people globally to learn more about the incredible work of this modern saint.

Eileen McGuire, who is the director of the Irish Office of St Pio in Dublin, has for decades been promoting the works of Padre Pio, and also giving people the chance to express their devotion towards him.

The office was originally established due to the influence and works of a Capuchin priest, Fr Alessio Parente, who moved to Ireland for a short period of time having been Padre Pio's assistant during the last six years of the saint's life.

He arrived in Dublin in June 1968 to learn English and also take a break from caring for him. Upon learning that St Pio had died in September of the same year, Fr Alessio decided to pay homage to the saint and began writing the magazine *The Voice of Padre Pio*, which now circulates all over the English-speaking world.

"I didn't know anything about Padre Pio until this man came into my life. Of course, I knew he was priest who had stigmata in San Giovanni in Southern Italy. There it stopped. Fr Alessio would tell us stories of Padre Pio and stories of his experiences which were amazing," Eileen says.

Exams

Fr Alessio lived with Eileen and her family for over a year, and she helped correct his articles. After completing his English exams, he returned to Italy and was responsible for building the English Office in San Giovanni, but often returned to Ireland.

"He came to Ireland every year for our big celebration in Knock and travelled all over Ireland speaking on Padre Pio", explains Eileen, adding that because of this, prayer groups and devotion towards the saint began to spread.

Over the years the family developed a deep respect and devotion for St Pio and



Fr Alessio Parente (left) with Padre Pio.

decided to "give over a little part" of a house they had close by so that people could receive a blessing from Fr Alessio with greater ease and less disruption. Eileen was also given the gift of a glove that Padre Pio had worn which can be taken by a visitor to the Oratory in the centre for a moment of quiet contemplation and prayer.

The Office is now an official charity affiliated to the friary in San Giovanni Rotondo and is also resource centre for reading materials, videotapes, devotional objects and medals of St Pio, with their role, according to Eileen, being "to spread correct literature and an exact spirituality of Padre Pio".

“It is an amazing place to see. People are coming from all over the world”

According to Eileen, one of the main reasons St Pio continues to garner so much attention is because of how recent a saint he is, and that many people still have first-hand accounts about him.

"First of all, he is a saint from our time – many, many people were alive when he was alive. We hear about saints from the far distant past but Padre Pio lived in our time. When I went to San Giovanni, I met many friars that lived with Padre Pio and had such conviction about him, about his holiness, about his spirituality, about everything about him," Eileen says.

In 2004, the Sanctuary of St Pio of Pietrelcina was built, which is a Catholic shrine in San Giovanni, and Padre Pio has been moved to the crypt beneath it, which Eileen describes as a "work of art".

"It is an amazing place to see. People are coming from all over the world. I heard someone recently say last year that they had more pilgrims than Lourdes, so it

really is a busy, busy place," she says.

The Irish Office arranges two trips to San Giovanni every year where people have the opportunity to explore the area where Padre Pio lived and visit his tomb.

"Groups go out to San Giovanni throughout the year. It's like Medjugorje, Lourdes, or anywhere else, you have groups going out all the time. We have a group going out now in June and that's already full. We have another group going out in October which is filling quite fast", Eileen continues.

"We would take out roughly around 45-50 people each time and it's looked after by Marian Pilgrimages. Groups are coming out from all over Ireland. The group leaders organise that in various parishes," she says.

On March 17, Pope Francis visited the shrine in San Giovanni and celebrated Mass there, being the third Pope to visit in the last 50 years.

"There has always been Irish input in these ceremonies. As the Director of the Irish Centre for St Pio I have been present on all occasions. I read a prayer in Irish for the Beatification of Padre Pio in Rome and I read a reading in English during the canonisation of St Pio," Eileen explains.

"They recognise the work that people all over Ireland put into it. We have been represented in all of the ceremonies," she says.

Although being involved in spreading the message of Padre Pio has many positive aspects, points of difficulty and sadness also arise. In January 2000, Fr Alessio died and his successor, Fr Joseph Pious, who was an American priest attached to the friary in San Giovanni also died in May later that year. The Capuchin priest, Fr Sean Dooley, who was "very interested and devoted to St Pio" also passed away that December.

"We lost three or four

friends that year who were a tremendous help here, and we relied on them a lot. That was a difficult year," Eileen says.

However, when asked whether she faces any challenges in running the centre, Eileen says that because they do not actively advertise it, there aren't any difficult challenges that they encounter.

“It's like Medjugorje, Lourdes, or anywhere else, you have groups going out all the time”

"We're just here. And if people want to come, people who are ill, we have an oratory here where they can bless themselves if they wish with the relics of St Pio. We don't in any way advertise anything. They just come. It's spreading," Eileen says, adding that the Padre Pio weekend which takes place on the third Sunday of September every year is proof of this.

"People come from north, south, east and west and from England to that event," she says.

Although Eileen plays an incisive role in the centre, she holds that it would be impossible to run without volunteers and helpers who sacrifice their time to make Padre Pio more known.

"I have lots of voluntary help here and without that it couldn't happen. When it comes to Knock every year, it's all hands-on-deck and I'm in contact with group leaders all over Ireland who have prayer groups, who order literature, who want books and they get it through us. I suppose that's the role we fulfil, to spread literature all over Ireland. So, it's nothing that I do on my own. I do it with help, with lots of help," Eileen says.

i For more information on Padre Pio, see: <http://www.padrepio.ie/index.htm>

WHO IS THE MAN BEHIND THE MITTEN?



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Written by Fr Francesco Napolitano, who knew and worked with Padre Pio, this biography brings you up close to an extraordinary mystic's humble beginnings and recounts stories of the obstacles he overcame, the people he touched, and the stigmata he bore.

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A controversial Capuchin

Padre Pio's path to acceptance in the Church was far from a smooth one, writes **Greg Daly**



When Padre Pio was canonised by Pope St John Paul II in June 2002 before a crowd of 300,000 people it seemed in some ways almost a formality. The path to Padre Pio's beatification just three years earlier had, however, been far from straightforward, with the saint having once been a highly controversial figure.

It was not long after Padre Pio of Pietrelcina received the stigmata in 1918 that rumours began to spread of cures and other miracles linked with him. People talked of souls being read, of bilocation, of the blind being able to see and the lame being able to walk, of cancerous tumours disappearing, of the gangrenous foot of a soldier, deemed by doctors beyond treatment, being healed.

Unsurprisingly, the 31-year-old Capuchin became a celebrity, with huge crowds gathering in San Giovanni to hear him say Mass, to have him hear their Confession, to be blessed by him or even just to see him.

Scepticism

Equally unsurprisingly, Church authorities viewed the whole affair with some scepticism, with the local bishop, Archbishop Pasquale Gagliardi of Manfredonia, suspecting fraud and wondering if Padre Pio's Capuchin community was seeking to profit from the affair.

Indeed, there seemed to be some evidence that the stigmata were indeed fraudulent. One Maria De Vito, the cousin of a local pharmacist, had claimed that when he first met Padre Pio in 1919 the friar had bought four grams of carboic acid from him, claim-

ing it was for disinfecting syringes for injections – Italy was at the time in the throes of the Spanish Flu epidemic that killed over 50 million people around the world between 1918 and 1920, and anti-flu injections were given at San Giovanni's Capuchin friary. De Vito speculated, however, that such acid could have been used by Padre Pio “to cause or further irritate wounds on his hands”.

Suspicion was not confined to the locality – when Pius XI became Pope in 1922, the similarly sceptical Vatican had Dr Paschal Robinson visit San Giovanni to examine the situation.

Almost certainly the first Irish person to meet Padre Pio, Dr Robinson had been born in Dublin in 1870, raised in the United States, and worked as a journalist before becoming a Franciscan in 1896, being ordained five years later. An eminent medievalist and specialist on St Francis and early Franciscan history, he became professor of medieval history at the Catholic University of America in 1913, being inducted into the Royal Historical Society the following year.

In 1919 he was taken into the Holy See's diplomatic service, in which role he would serve at the Paris Peace Conference and in the Middle East, becoming in 1930 Ireland's first papal nuncio since Archbishop Giovanni Battista Rinuccini in the 17th Century.

An accomplished journalist, academic, and diplomat, Dr Robinson seemed an ideal choice for the task of investigating what was going on at San Giovanni Rotondo.

He swiftly concluded that Padre Pio's wounds were genuine, with the bleeding from



Pope Benedict XVI prays in front of the exhumed body of St Padre Pio in the crypt of the Church of Santa Maria delle Grazie in San Giovanni Rotondo. Photos: CNS

them being quite real – some had claimed that the whole phenomenon was nothing but a hoax. Further, he noted that the Capuchin covered the wounds and seemed embarrassed by them, with the publicity surrounding them not being sought by him.

“Over the eight days Dr Bignami prescribed for the treatment, the wounds bled more”

However, while he believed the wounds were genuine, he would not com-

ment on what had caused them, something about which doctors had differed.

One, Dr Amico Bignami, Professor of Pathology at the Royal University of Rome, an atheist who in 1919 had been asked by the Capuchins to examine the wounds, had speculated that they had begun as a pathological condition, aided by auto-suggestion, and had been sustained through the use of chemicals – Padre Pio had told him that he disinfected the wounds with iodine a couple of times a week or more.

Believing that the wounds would heal if Padre Pio was denied any opportunity to

clean or irritate them with chemicals, Dr Bignami had all the iodine removed from the friar's cell – the friary's Guardian, Padre Paolino, was more concerned about carboic acid – and ordered his wounds bandaged and sealed by witnesses, with these being changed and resealed each day, the treatment's progress was recorded.

Over the eight days Dr Bignami prescribed for the treatment, the wounds bled more than before, with the friars tasked with changing the bandages noting both the continued bleeding and the fact of the bandages never being tampered with. Two years later, Bishop Raffaello Carlo Rossi penned a 200-page report into the matter, observing that the stigmata “were not caused or preserved with physical and chemical means, which, after all, would have been in absolute contrast with Padre Pio's proven virtue”.

Professor Luigi Romanelli, the head of Barletta's civil hospital, the first person asked by the Capuchins to investi-

gate Padre Pio's wounds, had believed that any speculation about their origin would be beyond medical competence, but following Dr Bignami's investigation and attempted cure, he returned to the Capuchin community with Dr Giorgio Festa in October 1919. Following his own investigation, Dr Festa wrote a detailed report confidently ruling that the wounds were not due to an external trauma or the application of any chemical irritants.

Cause

Whatever the cause of the stigmata might have been, however, Dr Robinson thought the matter best played down, and recommended that Padre Pio not appear in public as long as the stigmata were present. In 1923 the Holy Office – the forerunner of today's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith – said that there were not grounds to deem Padre Pio's wounds supernatural in origin, and urged Catholics not to visit San Giovanni.

The stigmata, of course,

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An image of St Padre Pio is seen in the background as Pope Benedict XVI elevates the Eucharist during Mass.

of souls which has been diabolically set up to discredit the Holy Church in the world, and especially in Italy.”

At the same time, he added, “In the calmness of my spirit I humbly persist in believing that the Lord *faciat cum tentatione provandum* (is doing this as a test of faith), and that from this immense deception will come a teaching of clarity and health for a great many.”

According to Msgr Pietro Parente, a Holy Office investigator who had taken notes and made secret films in San Giovanni Rotondo, it seemed the devotion of three female followers of Padre Pio was “not merely spiritual”.

In response to the report, Msgr Carlo Macari was sent to San Giovanni Rotondo in July 1960. On arrival, he cancelled all celebrations for Padre Pio's 50th priestly jubilee, which was due to fall on August 10.

“The treatment seemed remarkable, especially given how the friar's jubilee had provoked congratulations from numerous bishops”

The friar was swiftly barred from celebrating weddings and baptisms, restricted to a strict 30-minute slot for Mass – a far shorter period than his usual celebration allowed for, banned from hearing the confessions of certain individuals, limited to three minutes with each penitent, and forbidden from speaking to women alone.

Denying him human support at this time, friars who were his friends – including ones who tended him in his illness – were sent away, and his own superior even went beyond Msgr Maccari's strictures, posting signs directing people not to approach Padre Pio and forbidding other friars from showing him such kindnesses as help going upstairs.

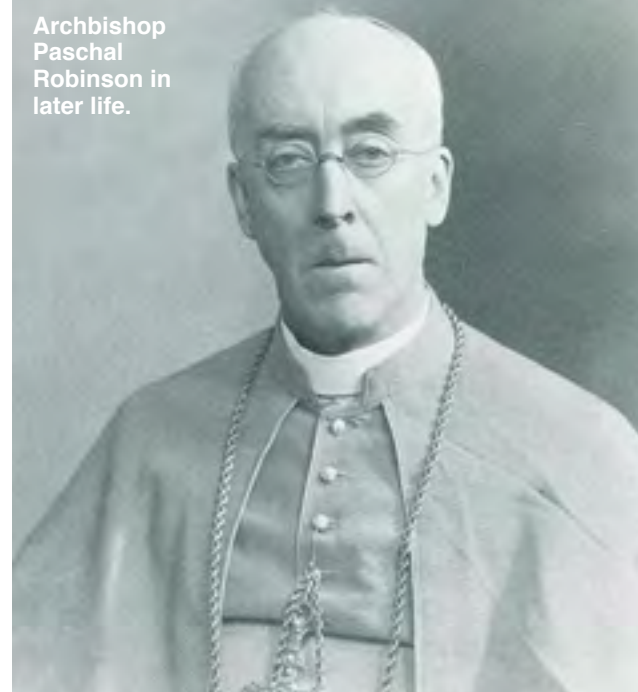
The treatment seemed remarkable, especially given how the friar's jubilee had provoked congratulations from numerous bishops across Italy and even from Chicago, with the Italian prelates writing to congratulate Padre Pio including Bologna's Cardinal Giacomo Lercaro and Milan's Cardinal Giovanni Battista Montini, the future Blessed Pope Paul VI.

According to Stefano Campanella's study of Pope St John XXIII and Padre Pio, *Obedientia et Pax*, when confronted with lurid accusations about Padre Pio, the Pope consulted the Archbishop of Manfredonia, Dr Andrea Ceserano, who convinced him that the accusations were not true; he

ordered the Holy Office not to increase sanctions.

Things were, however, far from good, with Padre Pio increasingly looking like a pariah, but things changed rapidly with the accession to the papacy in 1963 of Blessed Paul VI, who had in 1959 asked Padre Pio for his prayers.

In 1964, the Pope directed the Holy Office that Padre Pio should not be confined “like a criminal” but should instead be permitted to practise his priestly ministry “in complete freedom”. For the last few years of his life Padre Pio's ministry



Archbishop Paschal Robinson in later life.

flourished, while devotion to him continued to grow.

The priest's popularity didn't stop with his death in 1968, with his heavenly intercession being sought and numerous miracles being attributed to him. His cult continued to develop and thrive during Blessed Paul's papacy – hardly surprising given his conviction that his “real mission” would begin after his death.

“Look what fame he had, what a worldwide following gathered around him,” said Blessed Paul in 1971. “But why? Because he was a philosopher? Because he was wise? Because he had resources at his disposal? No – because he said Mass humbly, heard confessions from dawn to dusk and was – it is not easy to say it – one who bore the wounds of our Lord. He was a man of prayer and suffering.”

Padre Pio's popularity kept growing during the reign of St John Paul II, with the Polish Pope beatifying and canonising the once-controversial Capuchin, alluding at both ceremonies to how he had himself met Padre Pio in 1947.

“When I was a student here in Rome I myself had

the chance to meet him personally, and I thank God for allowing me today to enter Padre Pio's name in the book of the Blessed,” he said at the May 1999 beatification ceremony in which he described Padre Pio as a “humble Capuchin friar” who “astonished the world”.

Noting how those who went to San Giovanni Rotondo to attend Padre Pio's Mass, to seek his counsel or to confess to him had seen in him “a living image of Christ suffering and risen”, the Pope said that Blessed Pio of Pietrelcina had shared in the Passion with a

ual assimilation to Christ, a strengthening of true holiness.”

Three years later, on a blisteringly hot June day in 2002, the Polish Pope canonised Padre Pio of Pietrelcina, holding up the Capuchin mystic as a model for the faithful, most especially priests – and as the kind of figure who in our day Pope Francis consistently urges priests to resemble.

“Padre Pio was a generous dispenser of divine mercy, making himself available to all by welcoming them, by spiritual direction and, especially, by the administration of the sacrament of Penance,” he said, continuing, “I also had the privilege, during my young years, of benefitting from his availability for penitents.”

The experience of having one's Confession heard by the new saint was clearly momentous.

“The ministry of the confessional, which is one of the distinctive traits of his apostolate, attracted great crowds of the faithful to the monastery of San Giovanni Rotondo,” said the Pontiff. “Even when that unusual confessor treated pilgrims with apparent severity, the latter, becoming conscious of the gravity of sins and sincerely repentant, almost always came back for the peaceful embrace of sacramental forgiveness.”

St John Paul's encouragement of priests to carry out with joy and zeal their ministry, after the example of Padre Pio, made it all the more apt, then, that in June 2009 Pope Benedict XVI made his own pilgrimage to San Giovanni Rotondo, two days after launching the Year of Priests.

The humble Capuchin from Pietrelcina had been recognised as the Curé d'Ars of the 20th Century, and a model for priests in the 21st.

did not go away, and so over the decades various restrictions were placed on the friar – he was not merely barred from publicly displaying his wounds, but was at times forbidden to say public Masses, to hear lay confessions, to meet with devotees, or even to answer letters. Popular support for Padre Pio never abated, however, and when plans to assign him to a community in Ancona in northern Italy became public, the prospect of riots led the authorities to decide to leave him where he was.

In 1933, Pius XI lifted restrictions on Padre Pio's public ministry, with Pius XII encouraging the faithful to visit the friar, but while the Capuchin mystic's popularity and fame continued to grow, the cloud of suspicion lingered in the Vatican. Over the decades, investigations continued, with bishops and priests of all shades being sent from Rome or by the Capuchins themselves to the small town in the Gargano Mountains to ponder what to do about Padre Pio.

The pontificate of Pope St John XXIII saw the Holy Office directing further inquiries into Padre Pio, against the background of a detailed report into alleged wrongdoing by the friar being put before the Pope.

“No less painful, and perhaps even more distressing... were the trials which he had to endure as a result”

A note written by Pope in June 1960, following receipt of the report, said: “I am sorry for PP (Padre Pio), who has a soul to be saved, and I pray for him intensely. What happened – that is, the discovery because of the films – *si vera sunt quae referuntur* (if it is true what they say) – of his intimate and incorrect relations with the women who constitute his Pretorian guard, which even now stands firm around him, leads one to think of a vast disaster

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It was with good reason that Padre Pio's Mass drew huge crowds, according to Fr Francesco Napolitano

Padre Pio's life on earth was in perpetual union with God; all of his letters give valid evidence of this.

In a letter written to his spiritual director, Fr Benedetto of San Marco in Lamis, on September 8, 1911, he expressed himself in this manner: "My heart beats very fast whenever I am with Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. It sometimes seems to me that it will leap out of my chest. Sometimes, at the altar, I feel as if my whole being were on fire; I cannot describe it to you. My face, especially, seems to want to go up in flames."

In another letter to Fr Agostino of San Marco in Lamis, written on March 12, 1912, he wrote: "I have a great desire in my heart to tell you so many things, all about Jesus; but I don't know how to express myself, and my eyesight is failing."

"Yesterday, on the feast of St Joseph, only God knows how much happiness I experienced, especially after Mass, so much that I still feel it within me. My head and my heart were burning, but it was a fire that was beneficial to me. My mouth felt all the sweetness of the immaculate flesh of the Son of God. Oh! If only at this moment, while I am still feeling it, I could succeed in burying this consolation in my heart, I would certainly be in paradise!"

"How happy I am with Jesus! How gentle is his spirit! But I become confused, and can only cry and repeat: Jesus, my nourishment! What afflicts me most is the fact that so much love from Jesus is repaid with ingratitude."

"He always loves me and always holds me close to Him. He has forgotten my sins, and possibly recalls only his mercy...he enters me every morning, and pours into my poor

heart all the effusion of his goodness...this Jesus almost always asks me for love. and my heart, rather than my lips, replies: oh, my Jesus, I want...and then I can't continue. But finally I exclaim: yes, Jesus, I love you; at this moment I believe that I love you, and feel the need to love you more; but, Jesus, I have no more love in my heart. You know that I gave it all to you; if you want more love, take my heart and fill it with your love, and then order me to love you; I shall not refuse. as a matter of fact, I beg you to do it; I desire it."

Example

Here is a simple example of how a soul in love with God feels; there is no need to ask why. Padre Pio was the faithful friend of Jesus; his meeting with his divine friend took place every morning at dawn, at the altar; the meeting was visible to everyone who attended his Mass.

For such occasions he thought it necessary to prepare himself for several hours, in order to be worthy. In order to celebrate Holy Mass at dawn, and spend several hours in spiritual preparation before Mass, he would spend the night meditating on the great miracles which, through his priestly powers, would soon be in his wounded hands.

The friars who were close to him can testify to the hours he spent in pious recollection, while they themselves were struggling to stay awake.

The desire to have Christ in his hands was always agonising, and only the sight of the altar would placate him.

He never failed to cry when he celebrated the divine Sacrifice.

The thousands of pilgrims who came to San Giovanni Rotondo during the 50 years of Padre Pio's priestly life, and had the privilege

of participating in one of his Masses in the Sanctuary of Santa Maria delle Grazie, were witnesses to the uniqueness of the celebration.

"A Mass that I shall never forget," wrote C. Cree. "I attended many of Padre Pio's Masses," wrote Maria Winowska, "but no two were alike. Certainly the Padre was rigorously faithful to the rubric, and his manner was marvellously sober; nevertheless, it was clear that he was not alone in the process. Some sort of presence surrounded, seconded, and hindered him."

"One Friday I saw him breathless and oppressed, brusquely shaking his head, struggling in vain to get rid of an obstacle which was preventing him from pronouncing the words of the consecration. it was like a hand-to-hand battle in which he was the victor, but which exhausted him."

"At other times, from the 'Sanctus' on, large drops of sweat ran down his forehead wetting his face which was tearfully contracted."

“The greatness of Padre Pio's Mass lay in the knowledge that Jesus Christ performed his works through the wounded hands of a man”

On Mount Gargano, which was sanctified by his presence, Padre Pio renewed the Sacrifice of Golgotha every morning at five o'clock; there he offered himself as a victim, a sacrifice for poor sinners.

As soon as the doors of the church opened, around four o'clock, there was a terrible commotion to get to the altar where the Padre was to celebrate Mass; everyone wanted to be as close as possible. Then, as soon as Padre Pio could be seen in the doorway of the sacristy, a veil of silence, of divine mystery, immediately fell upon the faithful, creating an air of profound meditation, a heavenly sensation.

As a rule, his Mass lasted about an hour, but no one tired of attending, nor was anyone bored or distracted. it was the best time to amend one's own faults before God.

The greatness of Padre Pio's Mass lay in the knowledge that Jesus Christ performed his works through the wounded hands of a man.

After reading what took place on the altar, one might suppose that Padre Pio was selfishly wrapped up in his celestial joy, but in reality he was always close to his spiritual children, making their worries and sorrows his own.

One day, a woman whose husband was ill, came to San Giovanni Rotondo asking that he be cured through the intercession of the celebrated stigmatist. All through the Mass she did nothing but change seats, eager to be first in line to place her petition. Every attempt was in vain, so the poor woman rejected the idea of giving Padre Pio her petition as he passed, in favour of seeing him in the confessional. Holding onto this ray of hope, she entered the sacristy, only to find it very crowded. reluctantly, she wondered if it was time to give up.

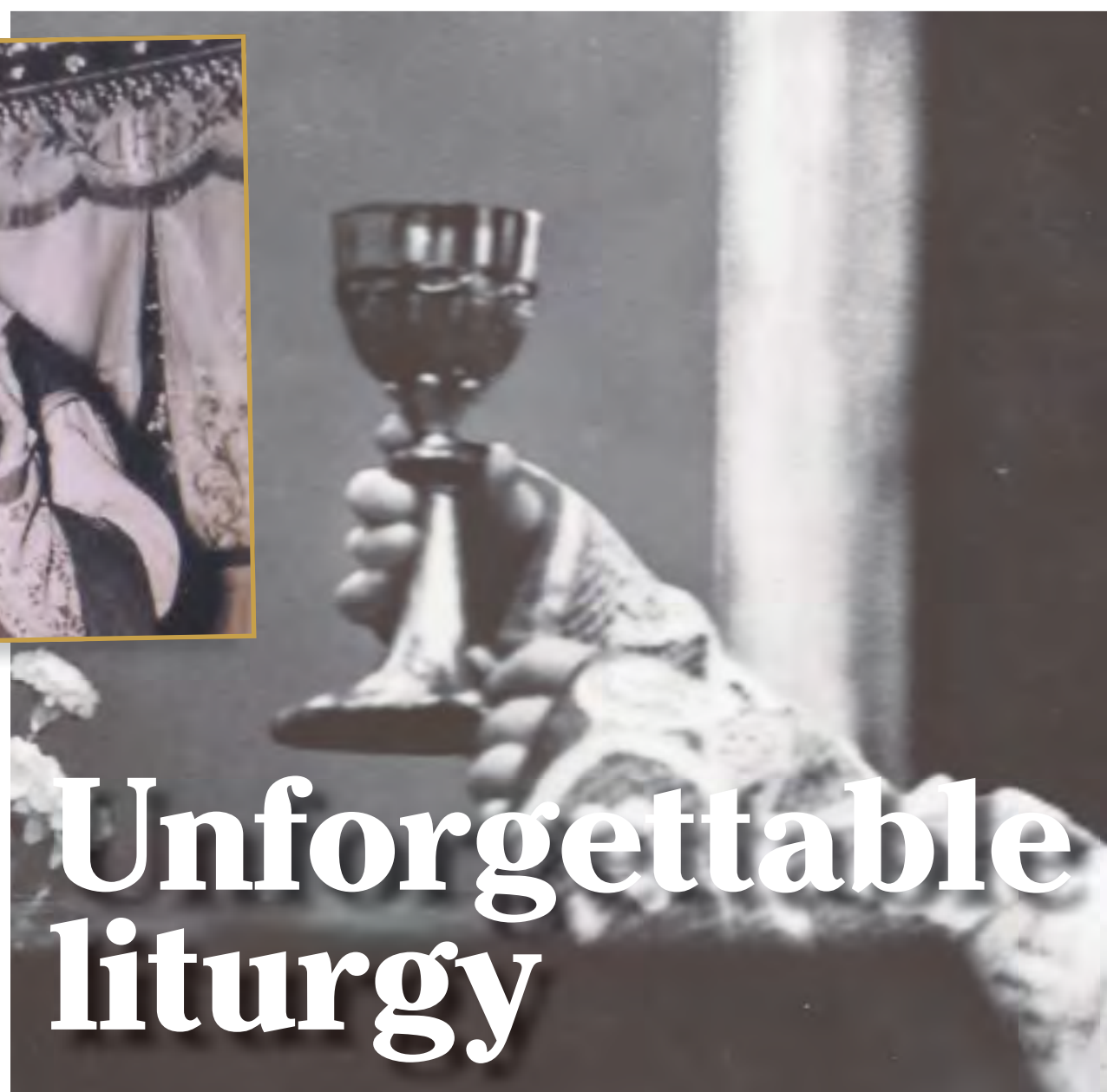
All at once Padre Pio appeared in the doorway, and all the women rushed forward to be able to kiss his wounded hand. Making his way through the crowd, the Padre approached the poor, tearful woman, and in a voice that was half joking, half severe, he said to her, "My dear, when will you stop moving about from left to right, constantly buzzing in my ear ... do you think I'm deaf? You have already asked me five times. I have understood. Go home and everything will be all right."

We can therefore hazard to say that although Padre Pio appeared to be 'heavenly self-centred', he never failed to notice those who needed his assistance, even when they were at a distance.

Padre Pio had a great influence on priests who came to San Giovanni Rotondo and attended his Mass; many of them recaptured their fervour through the merits of Padre Pio, and are today saintly priests and great apostles.

One such priest wrote to the magazine *Epoca* on September 20, 1968: "I am a priest who, years ago, went to Padre Pio in the company of a man who was seeking a cure. I was delighted to have the opportunity of studying the mystery of the friar ... I shall say immediately that I wasn't able to prove anything."

"The sick man whom I accompanied was not cured; I smelled no perfume, nor did I have any visions. Moreover, when I went to confession, Padre Pio did not lift any mysterious veil from my soul. For me, he



Unforgettable liturgy



was nothing more than a good confessor, very much like all the others, I would say ... and yet, there was something unusual.

"For many days I attended Padre Pio's Mass, and for me, it was everything. I listened to the Mass from the upper balcony, at the side of the altar, missing neither a gesture nor an expression.

“It can be said that the celebration of Padre Pio's Mass literally upset the course of his, and everyone else's existence”

"I had already celebrated thousands of Masses, but in those moments, I must confess, I felt like a poor specimen of a priest, because Padre Pio truly spoke with God during every moment of the Mass; I should say that like Abraham, he struggled with God. God was present in his Mass, and not just in the eucharist, as in my Mass.

"Thus, in San Giovanni Rotondo I found a priest who truly and intensely loved God, in suffering and in prayer, loved him to the point of agony. a true saint!

"I don't know whether Padre Pio has ever performed any miracles; I only know that such a man could perform hundreds of them."

Another priest, Fr Domenico Mon-drone, a Jesuit, wrote in the maga-

zine *La Civiltà Cattolica*: "Anyone who has ever attended Padre Pio's famous Mass, will never forget it; one had the vivid impression of seeing time and distance, between the altar and calvary, annihilated.

"When the divine Host was raised by those hands, the mystical union between the offering priest and the eternal Priest was rendered more sensitive to the eyes of the faithful. At the sight of this, even the curiosity-seekers were profoundly touched."

It can be said that the celebration of Padre Pio's Mass literally upset the course of his, and everyone else's existence. It had polarised the attention of the world; it had even regulated the bus schedule, and the schedules of the hotels. everyone was practically convinced that Padre Pio's Mass was such an exceptional event that it could not be repeated.

That is why Nino Salvaneschi, an Italian writer, wrote this marvellous page on Padre Pio's Mass in his book *Breviary of Happiness*: "Never has any man of Christ manifested greater simplicity in his imitation of Christ praying in Galilee. His face pale, his eyes half closed, as if he were seeing a sharp ray or light, Padre Pio said his Mass at that simple and almost coarse altar, in an atmosphere that transcended this life; he seemed to belong to a humanity that was superior to ours. Gathered around him were the crowds of San Giovanni Rotondo who sounded like the murmuring sea, agitated by the south-west wind.

"Waves of people push forward to the altar, up to the three steps

“Waves of people push forward to the altar, up to the three steps where, many times, various bishops knelt to serve Mass and the crowd encircled the altar of the mystical Mass...”

where, many times, various bishops knelt to serve Mass. and the crowd encircled the altar of the mystical Mass, like an immense rosary of suffering humanity... and this was the Mass that Padre Pio said for the people of Puglie, a region scorched by the sun and battered by the Adriatic wind; it was also the Mass that he said for the crowds that came from distant places, from the cities of Europe, from America... Certainly that man was truly with God when he celebrated Mass."

At Padre Pio's Mass, there are those who cry, those who suffer, those who pray rapturously, and those who, by means of an unforeseen divine light, come to know their sins and visibly repent. The early morning vigil causes no fatigue; worldly things are forgotten. Time flies because everyone is united to the celebrant. With Christ crucified, they offer, they love, they adore.

Meanwhile, as Padre Pio retires, everyone's knees seem to be nailed to the floor.

Early years

In the early years, Padre Pio began his Mass at noon, immediately after hearing the women's confessions. Later, because of a prohibition for a period of time, he was obliged to celebrate Mass in the private chapel of the friary. And there it seemed even two hours were insufficient for his Mass. In his later years, he always celebrated Mass at five o'clock in the morning.

Three years before Padre Pio's death, the chronicles of the friary made the following notation: "On September 20, 1965, Padre Pio got up about one o'clock in the morning, made his preparation for Mass, went down into the sacristy about 10 minutes to four...when the time arrives that he can celebrate Holy Mass, he can no longer endure it. The thought of the Mass is a constant disturbance; sometimes when he wakes up during the night, he asks the time, or whether it is time to celebrate Mass.

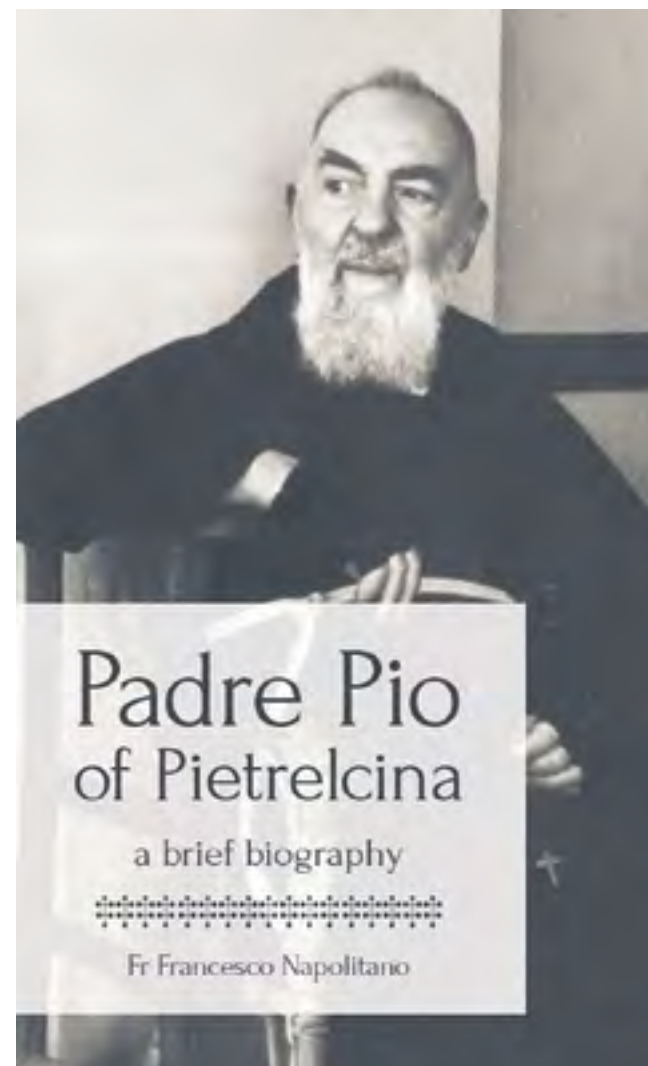
"Even during an illness, when, for a few days he was unable to go downstairs to celebrate Mass, he wanted to receive Holy Communion as quickly as possible, even before 4am. He became calm only after receiving Communion."

On March 29, 1911, Padre Pio wrote to Fr Benedetto: "I have such a hunger and thirst to receive Jesus, I could die of anxiety. Because I cannot bear not to be united with him, I am often obliged to receive His flesh when I have a fever."

This ardent desire, born of faith, which sustained and confirmed him, benefited those for whom he obtained graces, especially his spiritual children, and all the pilgrims who came to see him.

On the altar of Santa Maria delle Grazie, the pilgrims saw the miracle of living faith, since Padre Pio "impelled by freewill and grace, firmly substantiated the revealed truth".

✪ Extract from Padre Pio of Pietrelcina, published by Columba Press.



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First and foremost, Padre Pio was a simple friar, writes **Fr Bryan Shortall**

Padre Pio was asked once who are you? He replied: "I'm just a poor friar who prays."

I've no doubt that he would prefer to be remembered for this rather than all his supernatural gifts. Many years ago, one of our Irish Capuchins who ran the Padre Pio Prayer Group in Church Street often said of Padre Pio that he would not be canonised because of the stigmata, or the bi-location, or the ability to read souls, or the supernatural gifts he had. Padre Pio would be canonised, he said, because of how he lived the Franciscan life.

We know that Padre Pio was born Francesco Forgione into a farming family in 1887 in Pietrelcina in south eastern Italy. Interestingly, this man who would become a Capuchin Franciscan and eventually bear the stigmata was given the same name as the great saint of Italy, Francis of Assisi who also bore the stigmata in his time.

While Francesco Forgione didn't have great health as a boy and as a young man, he did like to play the odd game of football with his friends in the locality. Religion and the Church had a big part to play in everyone's life then and Francesco was no exception. It was felt by many people who knew the Forgiones that Francesco would probably end up as a priest and as a religious.

He was drawn to the Capuchins because he was inspired by a talk he heard from a young Capuchin brother who was questing in the area. Capuchin Friars often travelled between friaries preaching and promoting vocations and questing – or begging for alms for the friary and the poor.

Novice friar

When he joined the Capuchins in his late teens in Morcone, 20 kilometres to the north of Pietrelcina at the turn of the 20th Century, as a novice friar he was given the name Bro. Pio. In those days the Capuchin Friars were more identified by the place they came from rather than their surname – Padre Pio of Pietrelcina rather than Padre Pio Forgione.

As a student friar in simple (or temporary) vows he was in studies for the priesthood. He was perpetually professed,

and then ordained to the priesthood in the Cathedral of Benevento on August 10, 1910, at the age of 23. Four days later he offered his first Mass. Unusually, for six years he was permitted to remain with his family living at home as a Capuchin due to continued bad health.

It was after this, on September 4, 1916, that he was sent by his superiors to be stationed in the friary of Our Lady of Graces, San Giovanni Rotondo, in the province of

Foggia. Apart from a period of military service in the Medical Corps in Naples in 1915, Padre Pio was to remain in San Giovanni Rotondo until his death in 1968.

All Capuchin Franciscans take the vows of obedience, poverty and chastity. We take them for a probationary period of time first. Later after discernment by the student friar, those responsible for formation, and the Holy

Spirit, we take that life-long commitment.

In the first chapter of the rule of St Francis of Assisi which he wrote and which was approved by the Holy See in 1223 we read: "This is the rule and life of the Friars Minor, namely to observe the Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ, living in obedience, without anything of one's own, and in chastity. Bro. Francis promises obedience and reverence to our lord Pope Honorius and all

his successors canonically elected, and to the Roman Church. And all the friars are bound to obey Brother Francis and his successors." Here we see the beginning of the rule of life that Brother (later Fr Pio) professed and would live in community with the other brothers.

“The daily life of the friars, as noted, was taken up with prayer, Mass, work, recreation and meals. On Fridays to this day, the friars renew their vows together in the refectory”

Day in and day out, and sometimes rising at midnight, Padre Pio lived the rule of the friars. They had meditation in common and prayed the liturgical hours during the day. The friar's day is interspersed with prayer, work, and meals and recreation.

Charisms

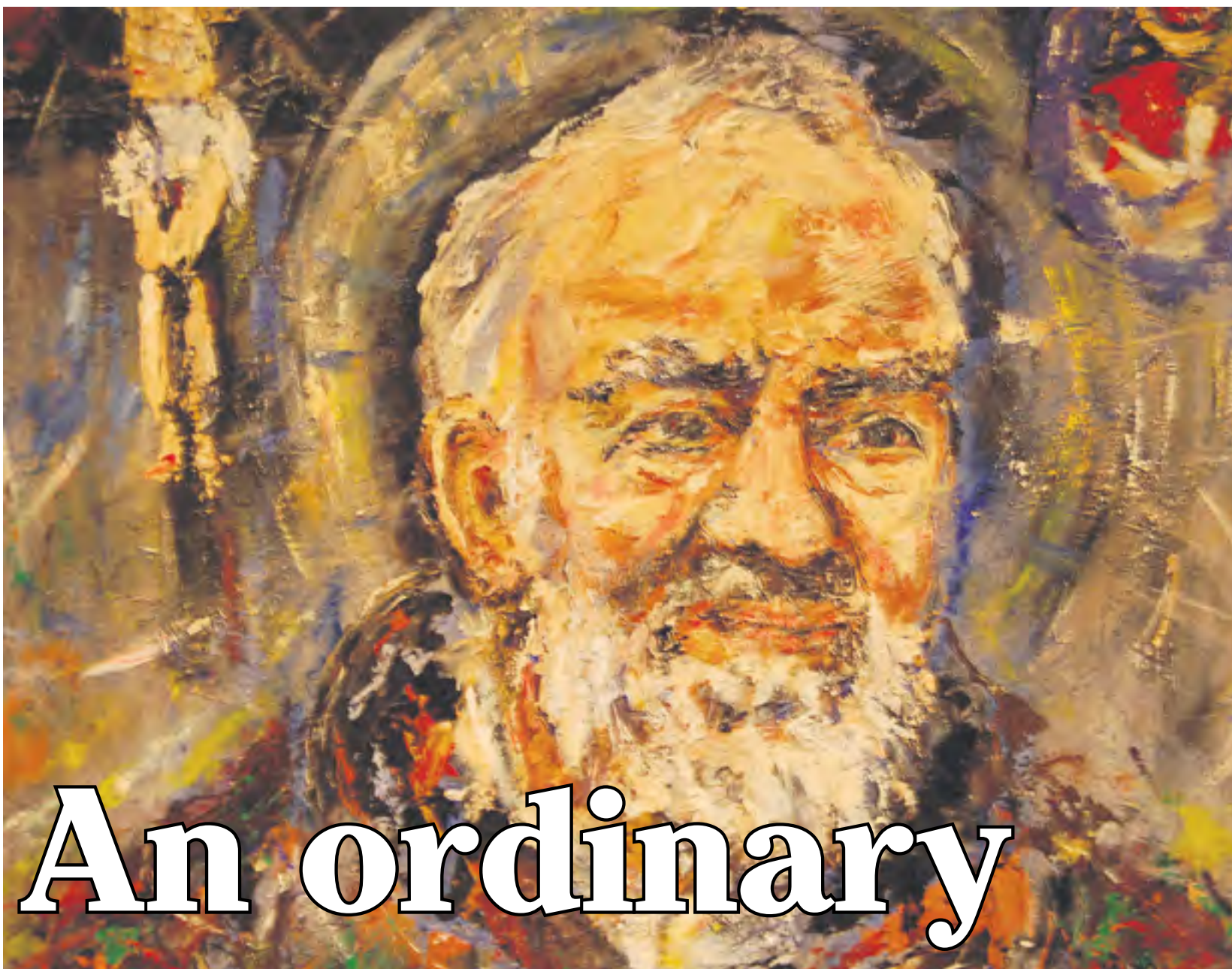
There are five Franciscan charisms which we try to live by. The first is 'Fraternity'. Fraternity means we live as a family, as a brotherhood, and

all the other things stem from this. The second is 'Prayer and contemplation'. Day and night, alone and in common we pray as brothers. The third is 'Poverty and minority'. We are Friars Minor, we try to seek the lowest place after the example of the 'Poverello' St Francis of Assisi. Again, when Padre Pio was asked who he was, he often said: "I'm just a poor friar who prays."

The fourth charism is 'Ministry and apostolate': we are engaged in many different ministries at the service of Jesus Christ and the Church and especially the poor. And the fifth charism is 'Justice, peace and respect for the integrity of creation'. This was something that was very dear to the heart of Francis of Assisi. To love all the environment, the plants, the animals, and humankind as being created by God.

Today the life of a Capuchin friar is not as difficult as it was a long time ago. The daily life of the friars, as noted, was taken up with prayer, Mass, work, recreation, and meals. On Fridays to this day, the friars renew their vows together in the refectory.

In the past, there were also certain penances the friars practiced in the choir and in the refectory on Fridays and days of penance. In the friary of San Giovanni Rotondo,



An ordinary

The five Franciscan charisms

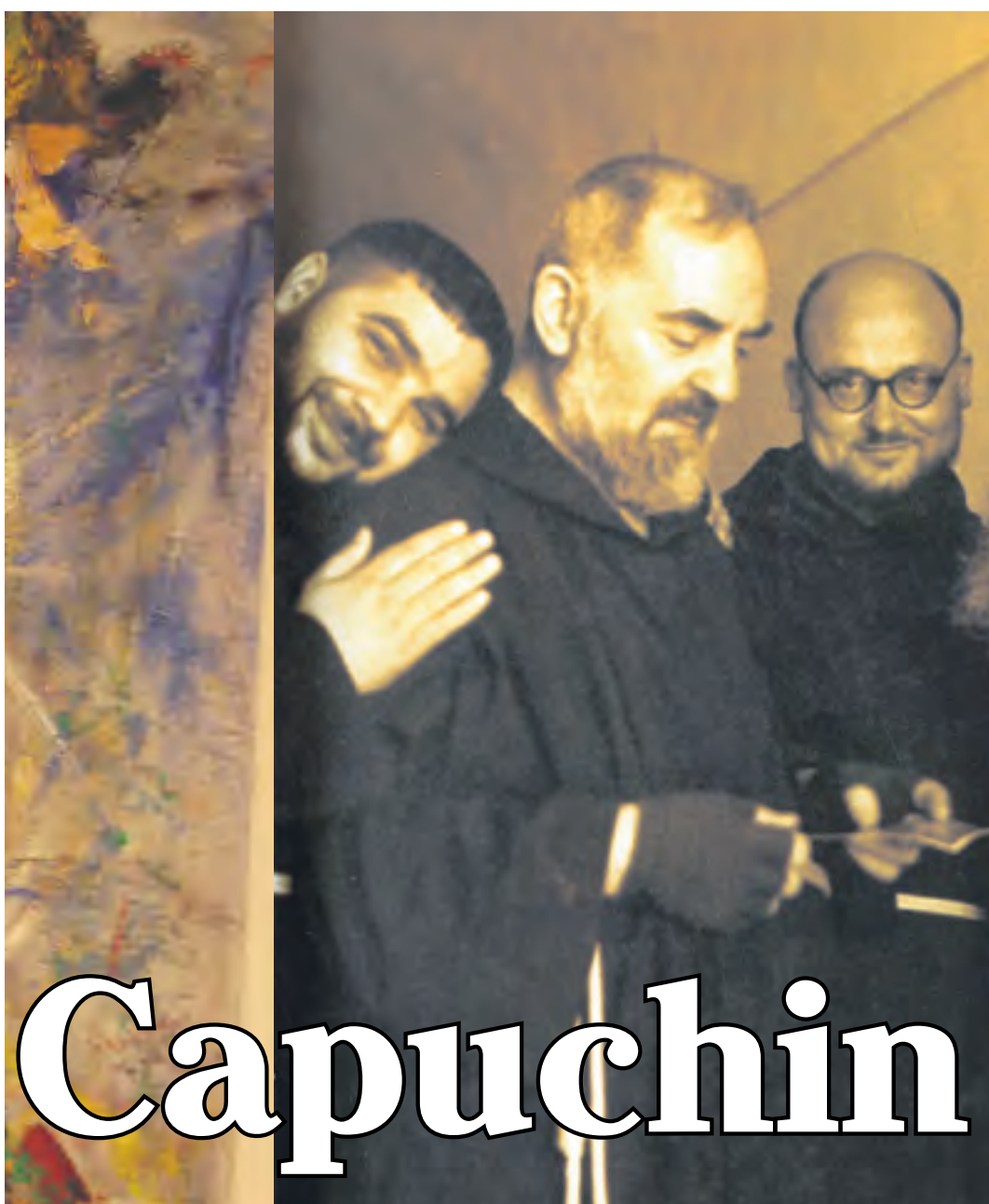
The first is 'Fraternity'.

The second is 'Prayer and contemplation'.

The third is 'Poverty and minority'.

The fourth charism is 'Ministry and apostolate'.

The fifth is 'Justice, peace and respect for the integrity of Creation'.



Padre Pio would have participated in meditation and prayer in common, and in the common penances, and in the partaking of meals in common with the other friars.

He would have shared in the housework in the refectory and around the house when his health permitted and he would have been at the disposal of the guardian (superior) of the friary and of the Provincial Minister.

Naturally, there were times in his life when he was asked not to say Mass in public and hear confessions while these spiritual phenomena associated with him were being investigated by the order and by Church authorities. This was very hard on him but he accepted it all as a penance and in obedience to the order and to the Church he loved.

Seldom alone

He was seldom alone, in that over the day, he was with the friars at Mass, at prayer, at meals, and at work and recreation. He had some friars who were close by to assist him and especially when his health was bad and when he suffered. All his life, he was regularly called upon to meet people for confessions and prayers.

I mentioned that the friars used to rise at midnight for the Midnight Office. Padre

Pio was often awake during the early hours anticipating his early morning Mass which he offered before an increasing amount of people over the years. Eventually because of the crowds, the friars had to build a bigger church, such was the size of the pilgrim crowds coming to his Mass.

He heard men's confessions in the sacristy after his thanksgiving after Mass, and later in the morning he would hear women's confessions in the public church.

“Padre Pio had some friars who were close by to assist him and especially when his health was bad and when he suffered”

As the years went on, people had to book a ticket to go to confession to Padre Pio. Here, he would enter the realm of the supernatural as he heard each confession. His compassion for those who were suffering because of a physical or a moral problem would come through.

There were also moments when someone went to confession to Padre Pio for the wrong reasons or just out of

curiosity. On these occasions he would have very little patience and would have even refused absolution knowing that then was not the right time.

In the refectory, Padre Pio would join other friars for the midday meal. The dining room in the friary is set up differently in many places these days but in Padre Pio's time the superiors would sit at the top of the refectory and the other members of the community would sit at tables on each side of the refectory in order of seniority.

Padre Pio was never guardian in the friary but was sometimes elected one of the house counsellors. The meal would begin by all the friars processing into the refectory and genuflecting and making the sign of the cross while the guardian would lead the grace before meals.

On days of penance meals would be taken in silence and they would often be frugal and without meat. On these days of penance, like in Lent for example, a friar would read a passage of scripture, or a chapter from the life of St. Francis of Assisi, or a part of the constitutions of the Capuchin Order. On other days and feast days, the friars would be allowed to talk and take a lit-

“Padre Pio was an ordinary friar who did extraordinary things. He seamlessly connected from our world to the next world in prayer”

tle wine with their meal.

One of our Irish Capuchin Friars, the late Fr Peter Dempsey, studied during the war years in Rome. While all the students were unable to travel home that time, they were sent to different friaries in Italy. Fr Peter found himself in the friary of San Giovanni Rotondo and often sat beside Padre Pio for the main meal and he regularly spoke to Padre Pio in Italian.

Fr Peter told me that he found him very interesting to talk to and one didn't get the impression of someone who had all these spiritual gifts from God. While he always noticed he wore the brown fingerless mittens, he came across as an ordinary friar among the community. Padre Pio told Fr Peter he prayed very much for the church in Ireland and for the Irish Capuchin missionaries.

There's a short movie that has surfaced in the last few years *Padre Pio – Rare Footage* and is available on You-

Tube. I believe it was filmed on cinecamera in black and white around the middle of the 1950's. In it you can see what looks like an excellent account of a day in the life of the friars in San Giovanni Rotondo and how Padre Pio is simply a friar among them.

Scenes

There are also some scenes of people queueing to meet Padre Pio and also queueing to go to confession to him. There is a scene from Padre Pio saying Mass and at the altar. There are also scenes of him interacting with the other friars, even in humour and in good form as he swishes his cord as if to say with a quip “get that camera away from me!”

You can see himself and the friars entering the refectory for the midday meal and how they all kneel down and some kissing the floor before they take their seats. Padre Pio makes his way in and kneels too before he takes his seat as the guardian who is not in shot says the grace before meals. We then see

the friars tucking into bowls of spaghetti and the wine bottles on the table in front of them.

Padre Pio was an ordinary friar who did extraordinary things. He seamlessly connected from our world to the next world in prayer and while he suffered greatly, he offered it all up and believed that his sufferings were not a waste of time and could perhaps do some good.

He spent many years helping to build the 'Home for the Relief of the Suffering', the great hospital in San Giovanni Rotondo which stands today as his legacy of care for those who suffer.

All in all, he continued to live his life, day and night, as a 'poor friar who prays'.

Fr Bryan Shortall OFM Cap. is parish priest of St Michan's Church, Halston Street, Dublin, and author of *Tired of all the Bad News*, published by Columba Press. Padre Pio – Rare Footage can be seen at <https://youtu.be/sQRxYCepS3Q>

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