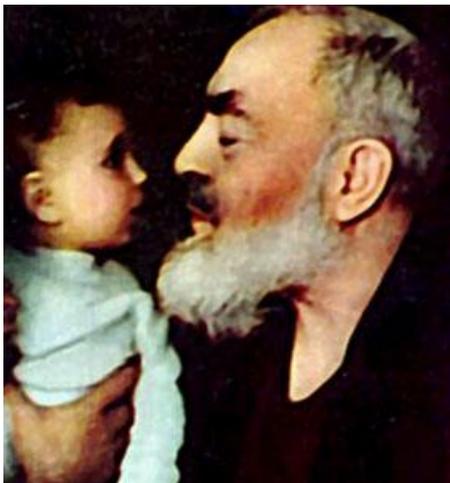
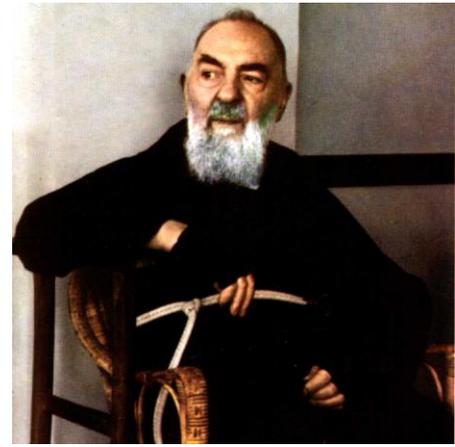


St. Pio of Pietrelcina (1887- 1968) - Feast Day Sept 23

“Padre Pio” was born to be a priest of Jesus Christ. He was born in 1887 of a poor peasant family in Southern Italy and from the age of five began to have mystical experiences and to feel the called to the priesthood. He became the most famous priest of the twentieth century, but he always remained the son of a peasant farmer. He retained the character of a peasant farmer: simple but honest, strong but tender, cheerful but sometimes gruff and even stubborn. He was a man’s man before he was a saint. For him religion was a serious business and he served his God in a manly way with all of his strength. He had a good sense of humor but he was deadly serious about the Mass, the sacraments, and the war to save souls.

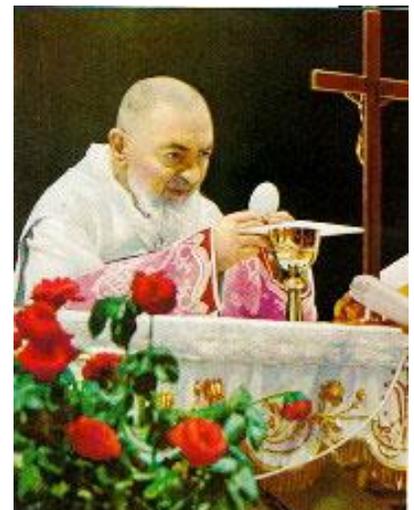
By age five he was already having visions of angels and demons and saints. He thought these were normal and did not speak about these things to anyone. He had an innocent soul and he could not stand it when the other children would swear or use God’s name in vain. Once he was playing and wrestling with another boy and pinned him to the ground. The other boy began to swear and Francesco immediately let him go and ran away. Once someone asked him why he avoided playing with the other children, and he responded by saying “They are not honest; they use bad language, and they swear.” When he was ten he was full of admiration for a Franciscan Friar, Fr. Camillo, who visited his village of Pietrelcina to beg for alms. Francis told his parents that he wanted to be a religious like Fr. Camillo with a beard! His father encouraged him and later traveled to the United States twice to work there and earn money to pay for Francesco’s studies so that Francesco could become a Franciscan. When Francesco was sixteen he was given permission to enter the Franciscans.



Just before he left his home he had a mysterious interior vision which gives us an idea of the special vocation to which Padre Pio was called. He had a vision of a beautiful man (later he realized it was Christ), who took him by the hand and said “Come with me, for you must fight a tough and aggressive warrior.” Christ led him to a huge plain where two great armies faced each other, one with beautiful people dressed in white and the other with ugly people led by one huge, ugly dark man who seemed very powerful. Francis felt afraid but Christ told him: “You must fight with this man. Take heart. Enter the combat with confidence. Go forth courageously. I shall be with you. In reward for your victory over him I will give you a shining crown to adorn your brow.” Then in the vision Francis fought and defeated this dark monstrous figure with the help of Christ.

The night before his departure he felt deep sadness about leaving his beloved family, but Jesus and Mary appeared to him and told him that he had “a very great mission” to accomplish. Jesus placed his hand on Francis’ head to strengthen him. The next day when he arrived at the Franciscan Friary and knocked on the door, it was by coincidence the Friar Camillo who opened the door to let him in! He was given of the religious name “Pio”.

As a young friar Francesco suffered much. Several times he was drafted to serve in the Italian army but he became violently ill and so they had to send him home. Several times he had extremely high fevers of up to 127.4 degrees which doctors could not explain. He spent time in Pietrelcina where he suffered many strange illnesses and attacks from the devil. He stayed in an upper room where at night people heard horrible violent noises, shrieking, and howls as he was attacked by the demons. Eventually he returned to his friary and was ordained a priest. He became quite popular as a confessor because of his wise advice and his ability to read peoples consciences and give them precisely the needed advice. While he was still young he began to experience the phenomena



of the stigmata, the wounds of Jesus on his hands, feet and side. For the first ten years he had the invisible stigmata, but then in 1918 he had the mysterious mystical vision of Christ which caused him to have the visible wounds of Jesus on his hands, feet and side. For the next forty years they bled (especially during Mass) and they never healed. Padre Pio tried to keep them covered but he was constantly examined by doctors throughout his life.

Padre Pio became more and more famous. The friary was remote and could only be accessed by a mule track, but soon there was a paved road and numerous hotels, restaurants and shops to serve the numerous pilgrims who would come to see “the saint” and to go to confession to him. People had to wait for two or three weeks to go to confession to him even though he would hear confessions for fifteen to nineteen hours a day. It is estimated that during his lifetime he heard approximately five million confessions. He could read people’s minds and could therefore identify the penitents who were insincere, unrepentant or mere curiosity-seekers. He would reprimand them and send them away. But these people always came back again to him later because they knew that he was right. There were atheists and masons and communists who came to him and were converted.

Padre Pio had many mystical powers and experiences. He could live for long periods without proper food or sleep. He had the gift of bilocation which meant that even though he never left his convent he was sometimes able to appear elsewhere and help people who were sick or in desperate situations. He had the gift of prophecy to know the future. He could interpret languages. People smelled sweet smell of roses coming from his stigmata. He could see guardian angels and in fact they would line up to ask him for prayers for people from other parts of the world. There are also stories of how souls from purgatory would appear to Padre Pio asking for prayers. He would say many rosaries every day. Once under obedience he told his superior that he had recited thirty-four!

Perhaps his most famous miracle was to cure the blindness of Gemma di Giori who was born in 1939 without pupils and was brought to from Sicily to Padre Pio at the age of seven. During her confession she did not say anything to him about her blindness, but Padre Pio made the sign of the cross over each eye. Her eyesight returned and for the rest of her life she was examined by dozens of doctors who could not explain why she could see despite the fact that she still had no pupils! This is an ongoing miracle because Gemma can still see and currently lives in Riber, Italy in the province of Agrigento.

Since Padre Pio was so effective in saving souls from hell, it is understandable that the devil was very angry with him and often attacked him at night. This phenomenon happened also to other saints such as St. Jean Vianney. One night the friars heard unusually loud noises from the Padre Pio’s bedroom. They heard the violent attacks of the devil but also the sound of bending steel. When they rushed into his cell they saw him lying on the floor, beaten and bruised. They also saw the steel bedposts of his bed twisted into horrendous shapes. They asked Padre Pio what had happened and whether he was all right. They also noticed that there was a pillow under his head as he lay on the floor and they asked him who had put the pillow there. Padre Pio answered them: “La Madonnina” (The “little Madonna”).

Padre Pio was the first priest in history to bear the stigmata. He truly lived in union with the suffering Christ for the sake of saving souls. He celebrated Mass each day before dawn with great crowds attending. He took three hours to say Mass and would often weep and pause for long periods in ecstatic adoration. Once someone asked him how he was able to stand for so long with the wounds in the feet. He replied: “When I celebrate Mass I am not standing, I am hanging.”

Padre Pio suffered the stigmata for a total of fifty years. And his correspondence with his spiritual directors reveals that he also suffered for fifty years the spiritual dryness known in hagiography as the “dark night of the soul.” He suffered all of this willingly to help Jesus save more souls.

Once a muscular football player saw Padre Pio walking painfully and he went up to him and said that he felt pity for him and that he wished that he could take all of Padre Pio’s sufferings upon himself for one hour in order to give him some relief. Padre Pio looked up and studied the face of the young man and said simply “You would die.”

Padre Pio started rosary prayer groups that spread throughout the world. His advice to people was a little phrase which rhymes in Italian: “Pregare, sperare, e non preoccupare” (“Pray, hope and don’t worry.”) Because of his great fame, many people were very willing to send contributions to the one building project that he desired: a state-of-the-art modern hospital in the remote area of his friary at San Giovanni Rotondo. His dream became a reality in 1956 when the hospital was inaugurated with a Mass which he celebrated before a crowd of 15,000 people. He wished his hospital to be called “The House for the Relief of Suffering.”

After eighty years of suffering for souls, Padre Pio died on September 23, 1968. He was beatified in 1999 and canonized in 2002.