

## PADRE PIO DA PIETRELCINA

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**P**ADRE Pio da Pietrelcina is not widely known in England, and the occasional references to him give the wrong emphasis. If he is mentioned, it is usually as 'that supposed stigmatist somewhere in Italy'; so that the immediate impression is adverse, even damning. Now that is as it should be. The masters of the spiritual life cry out to us: Beware of hysteria! Avoid strange phenomena! Live by Faith!

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Early in the morning, before five, the sacristy door at St Giovanni Rotondo, near Foggia, opens and Padre Pio comes in to say Mass. He comes in slowly, almost shuffling. A tired face, the beard tinged with grey; a large nose, slightly splayed-out from snuff-taking; eyes that pierce and laugh, while the mouth and cheeks follow the eyes; a face serene, radiant, simple. Quite stout, quite short—you see such figures every day on the roads of Italian towns and countryside—the Cappucini.

From that moment the day goes quickly. The central act of this priest's life is the central act of the life of every priest—the Mass. It is an act, it lasts an hour and a half, but it is not a performance. In anticipation it was one of the things about which to be sceptical. Not so in reality. For the rest of the day, he is in and out of the confessional; he prays quietly in the choir; he gives answers to questions received in letters; he has one meal only, at mid-day, eating with the rest of the Community, and in the evening he joins them at recreation. Monotonous, wearying, unspectacular: it is all these things. Let us look more closely then at various aspects and their effect.

### THE STIGMATA

There has been considerable research and reporting in recent times upon the origin of the phenomenon called stigmatisation, or the appearance of wounds upon a person's hands, feet and side, usually connected with those borne upon our Lord's body at the

Crucifixion. The general medical opinion today seems to be that hysteria probably cannot produce wounds like stigmata spontaneously, though the question remains open. It is considered, however, that the world of fantasy in which the hysteric lives is such that he or she may inflict the wounds, without seeing anything fraudulent or wrong in the act. If hysteria can be excluded and the general life indicates sanctity, the Church admits the possibility of a supernatural origin. But care is most necessary, and no direct acknowledgement is given during the lifetime of the person concerned. At all times, apart from the 'victim', the Church must safeguard her children from false mystics, and even in the case of a true mystic, from becoming hysterical themselves, losing their way to heaven by chasing unnecessary phenomena and miracles. Thus very great caution, even placing a ban upon public activity, may result after remarkable events. At the most, tacit approval is given, while a vigilant guard is kept to stamp out 'canonisation' and hysteria among the faithful.

Padre Pio received the marks of our Lord's wounds in the year 1915, while he was staying at his home near Benevento. He was in the garden, and he received them invisibly, the only indication, later recalled by his mother, being a waving of his hand, as though in pain, when he came in to his meal. He passed this off as nothing, and no more was said. In 1918 he received the wounds visibly, while making his thanksgiving, in the choir, at S. Giovanni Rotondo. He has remained ever since an ordinary friar, living there in a small and poor community of about twenty. From his ordination in 1910 he had been outstanding as a priest, not particularly because he was brilliant intellectually, but because he possessed that something which draws the faithful to the confessional and the sacraments. This something the ordinary people recognise. They sum it up differently as different aspects strike them—gentleness, understanding, humility, goodness, charity, or simply holiness. From his ordination he took an unusually long time to say Mass.

As soon as the stigmatisation was known to have happened, he was 'canonised' locally, even more than before. This was a proof of what they had understood all along. But Padre Pio's superiors and later Rome kept a careful check upon his activities. Interest and veneration grew to hysteria. The reaction in official circles was to prohibit the public appearance of Padre Pio for a period of

about two years, during which time he was forbidden to say Mass for a congregation or to hear confessions. Meanwhile intensive examination of the wounds was carried out and attempts made to heal them.<sup>1</sup> Padre Pio submitted to all questioning, examination and medical attention, from external methods of healing to diets. He was entirely obedient to his superiors, though the separation from his outward work for souls was a trial to him. Subsequently, he was allowed to resume public saying of Mass and hearing confessions. Certain strict rules were imposed, and Rome still keeps watch to see there are no irregularities.

Now although the natural thought at first for many visitors is to see the stigmata, this is soon dwarfed by a deeper attraction—a spiritual power sensed rather than seen. No one, in fact, has much chance to see the wounds. Padre Pio's hands are covered with woollen mittens at all times. The only exception is during the Mass, when the sleeves of the alb, purposely long, reach down to the fingers, only accidentally falling back far enough for those nearby to see the scarred palms at *Dominus vobiscum* or the blessing. When, walking from the sacristy to the confessional, people seize his hands, touching, pulling, squeezing, he has sometimes to raise them above his head, remonstrating. He is walking with a purpose: he is a Capuchin; he is a priest doing his 'father's business'; he is not a peepshow. So he turns sharply on those who jostle and talk in front of the Blessed Sacrament; he tells people plainly to reverence God and not behave as though they were at market. Once asked, 'Do the stigmata hurt you?', he replied simply, 'Do you think God gave them to me as an ornament?'. The impression is not that he desires publicity, but that he bears it; he accepts what amounts to a daily persecution because it is the means given to draw men to God. Thus, there are no particular ecstasies on feast days or Fridays; there is seldom noticeable bleeding from the wounds; nothing is visible when he walks about to mark him from any of the other friars. Moreover, the stigmata are no excuse for being idle. Padre Pio does more than a full day's work. He is seldom ill. His health has improved since he was pensioned from the army on account of sickness. In fact, each day more people come to him than he can see; he spends long hours in the confessional; he is given not a moment of peace while he is in public;

1. The findings and results were published later in Italy by Dr Giorgio Festa.

each morning he faces a battery of requests, monotonous, unchanging year in year out. Given a little understanding, a watcher must find springing to his mind that this is enough 'to try the patience of a saint'.

To sum up: the half a dozen or more times I have stayed at S. Giovanni Rotondo have impressed upon me the merely secondary importance of the stigmata. In fact, the theoretical teaching of mystical theologians here has outward expression. Beyond the phenomenon, one is drawn by the Christlikeness of Padre Pio. This leads men to want to follow his example, not physically, but in his whole life, echoing St Paul's 'with Christ I am nailed to the Cross'. The open wounds are not necessary for this nailing, they are only there displayed, as it were, after the nailing of complete surrender has taken place. With us, unfortunately, it has scarcely begun, as we admit to ourselves when we examine our consciences. Padre Pio's generosity in giving himself without reservation is sealed by the imprint. But the giving came first; the phenomenon followed as an 'unnecessary' gift from God. And now anyone in conversation with this friar is taken back, again and again, behind the phenomenon itself to the deep mystery of God's love, expressed in suffering upon the Cross.

#### THE MASS

From what has been said, it will be clear that Padre Pio is quite simply fulfilling the purpose of the priesthood, to be *alter Christus*. Now, more intensely than at any other time, the priest stands for Christ when he stands at the altar for Mass. And here, too, Padre Pio focuses attention on to the Sacrifice. When he says an ordinary low Mass, it lasts for about ninety minutes, excluding any giving of Communion. That is unquestionably overstepping the rubrics and is a point liable to raise objections and to cause scandal. However, it has occurred not infrequently in the history of the Church, with such a matter-of-fact person as St Ignatius of Loyola, and with St Philip Neri, to quote two examples only. There is all the difference between a very slow priest saying Mass normally, and this Capuchin. To say that assisting at Mass offered by Padre Pio is a greater spiritual benefit than a week in retreat is merely a way of describing what I mean. It has often resulted in something far deeper than devotion; it has brought a complete change of heart, a beginning of faith from atheism. It would be useless to describe

an action which must be witnessed. Suffice it to say that there is nothing really extraordinary, no levitations, blood from the wounds in great quantities or marked ecstasies. The most penetrating thing is the absolute surrender of the priest, who has put on the Lord Jesus. Suffering is manifest, but not picturesque; the intensity draws the average person to realise, perhaps for the first time, that the Mass is a real sacrifice, not a distant reproduction; that the priest offers and shares with the victim. To stand or kneel during this Mass in garlic-laden air, hemmed in, feeling faint, fighting to concentrate, all this makes the penance a good one for the congregation. It is a test of faith, and an act of love. Surprisingly, when the end comes, the time has gone with extreme rapidity. Does the length drive people away, as it would in the normal course of events? On the contrary, they come in ever increasing numbers to crowd round the altar and share the sacrifice. It is not necessary to go to S. Giovanni Rotondo to learn the meaning of the Mass more deeply. It can be done before any altar. But at S. Giovanni you will see what it means to say 'I preach Christ and him crucified'. For that reason it can be also a stumbling block. To a priest however—and I have spoken to many who have been there—comes a deeper and a more lasting insight into the way his daily Mass can and should transform him: that, through him, Christ may transform the world. To a lay person, here is a living example which has the effect of increasing his love for the Sacrifice by helping him to appreciate how active a sacrifice it should be for priest and people. Hence it seems a manifest expression of Christ's prophecy: 'I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to me'.

#### THE CONFESSIONAL

The priest has one endless duty—to get his charges to the Sacraments. After his Mass and thanksgiving, Padre Pio goes to the confessional. It is quite a new experience for an English woman to be told that as there are so many other women in front of her, her turn to go to confession will not come for two or three days. Yet women waiting to confess to Padre Pio must first stand in a queue to book a place in the queue, and later queue for the confession itself. Men are more fortunate, as they generally manage to be shriven during the first or second day, except at Eastertide, when the situation becomes impossible. Strange tales

are told of people sent away before confession as impenitent, of others whose secret sins have been revealed to them when not immediately confessed, of communist apostates reconciled, of lives directed anew without prior human knowledge. These are true for the most part, the witness to truth being the testimony of those restored to faith who now spend their days in work, prayer and penance. To my mind, however, a far more wonderful manifestation of the supernatural is in the unceasing succession of plain, ordinary penitents who have committed all the usual sins, nothing very terrible, have done nothing wonderfully good, the peasants, with their beads, the better-dressed men and women from the towns, the varying classes and peoples who are indeed the little people of God's kingdom. They come with faith for comfort, for counsel, for guidance, above all for the forgiveness of God. The stream is continuous for several hours a day for seven days a week. Any priest who has sat at all long in a confessional will recognise the patience, gentleness and understanding necessary for this task. It is interesting to watch Padre Pio from a distance in the sacristy as he shrives the men. He seems now to chide, now to soothe, now to joke, now to emphasise a point. He is not slow to send away trouble-makers, or to speak out in no uncertain terms if he sees someone trying to get ahead in the queue. And invariably he keeps to the rule, leaving the confessional in time for the community meal or recreation. It is all so simple, with no idea of the extraordinary. Yet even the most commonplace confession brings sureness and consolation, which cannot be traced, perhaps, to a particular word spoken or to a gesture; it seems the natural outpouring of God's grace through the priestly channel. 'Come to me, all ye who labour and are heavy burdened' . . . it applies to every priest in every confessional, but we all know that some aid us more than others, and Padre Pio appears as one of these. Penance brings pardon, and pardon peace. In the sacristy and confessional at S. Giovanni Rotondo, *pax et bonum* prevail not more truly than elsewhere (the Sacrament is the same), but more cogently perhaps, because expressed by one to whom might be applied: 'now not I; but Christ liveth in me'.

#### THE ENCLOSURE

For several hours each day and for the whole night, Padre Pio is within the enclosure. That is not strange when it is considered

that as a member of a community he is bound in obedience to attend the community exercises. These are to some extent modified in his case by the decision of his superiors to allow extra time for hearing confessions. He also eats very little, having only one meal a day, but this he has with the other friars. What is immediately noticeable is the continuation of the ordinary life of the community, as it were in spite of Padre Pio. Special arrangements have to be made for his Mass, but while it is going on, the other friars are saying public Masses, giving Communion and saying their Office in choir. October devotions, sermons, Benedictions go on according to schedule. Inside the convent, there is peace, broken into by the continual clang of the enclosure bell or the loud talking of the crowds, but nevertheless, peace. For the porter, for superiors, for the friars themselves, there must be many trials, many annoyances connected with living in this atmosphere of pilgrimage. Yet the attachment to and affection for Padre Pio is genuine and strong in the community. One of the most enlightening experiences is not open to many. This is to go into the garden on a summer evening during recreation. There, under the vines and among the cypresses, the Padre enjoys an hour or so of relaxation with those of the friars who are not busy and a few friends (one might say disciples), members of the Third Order. He is completely relaxed, the soul of the party. His interests are wide, ranging through politics and contemporary events to the number of Italians in London, his experiences in the army, the English cult of pets, the crops, the cost of living. He argues and is contradicted; he chaffs those sitting by, he takes snuff, passes it round, listens with interest to news and stories, is quick with repartee, has a lively sense of humour. Here I found a Gospel atmosphere, thinking again and again of the disciples clustered round our Lord, questioning him, doubting his opinions and not slow to voice their own, in no way quelled by magnificence, but rather encouraged to talk by the humility and ready understanding of the listener.

His whole attitude to life and to people is summed up again, yet indefinably, as holiness. The effect is to radiate peace and joy; his face is alight; being with Padre Pio you can catch the eager begging of the Apostles in the 'Lord, teach us to pray'. His fellow friars come by and pause to joke gaily; he is rebuked for having no faith in doctors; yet he is recollected in his lightheartedness. There is something about those evenings under the vines which

lingers with you long afterwards, which perhaps does not die. But like all human things, there is an end, for the community has a bell and a routine, so Padre Pio says goodnight in the corridor with a smile, a blessing, and a characteristic cuff on the side of the head with his mittened hand.

#### QUIA RESPEXIT HUMILITATEM

From peace, the visitor is ejected to a world of noise. The cramped ristorante where he goes to eat is overflowing with pilgrims, many of whom have been several times before and are proclaiming all they have seen and heard of Padre Pio to the less initiated. There is a true foundation for a great part of what is said. It is an objective fact that there is a perfume which fills the air at intervals and has an odour unknown in the world. There are well authenticated stories of healing; well checked evidence of bilocation; these and many others are spread by the ardent pilgrim, who probably embroiders them unwittingly. When new pilgrims arrive late at night they find all this: people captivated, people rebuffed, people disconsolate at missing confession owing to the crowd, but all with one mind determining to come again when possible.

Miracles are not for discussion here. But one thing must be said. Padre Pio has never publicly prophesied anything, either war, earthquakes or the end of the world. Nor does he heal publicly at S. Giovanni, though sick are brought to him. Bodily miracles attributed to him are worked at a distance from the convent, which he himself is forbidden to leave under obedience. As with Christ, the cure of the soul has priority. Here is the sane and healthy fact which goes so far to support the nature of his spirituality. Nothing could be further from hysteria, to all appearances, than this humble friar's behaviour. For naturalness and humility work together in him. Whether he is taking snuff, ordering the women to stop gossiping in church, or joking with the community, there is nothing affected. You have only to see him to grasp his deep humility. It is difficult to explain; it has to be experienced. Hemmed in by special regulations on one side, by a crowd which is often rude and thoughtless on the other, tormented by questions, pestered for blessings, cures, advice—nevertheless he continues unaffectedly to do his work as a priest, saying Mass, hearing confessions, giving counsel. To see him, you would never imagine



his daily stack of letters mounted to four hundred, or that he was visited by Bishops, priests and people from all over the world. Meekness and humility; his *Domine non sum dignus* said with his eyes and heart fixed on God echoes back another act of humility: 'I can do all things in him who strengtheneth me'.

If this account is over-coloured, it does not contain a measure of the spiritual effect that flows from S. Giovanni Rotondo. But converts are often over-enthusiastic in the eyes of their more staid companions in the faith; and I was, as it were, converted to belief in Padre Pio. This came about by visiting him, because he crystallises what I had been taught, what I had been trying and still am trying to learn of the spiritual life. He emphasises continually and above all other considerations the primary importance of holiness, especially in a priest. To this end, he focuses everything into love, shown by complete emptying of self in the service of Love, through absolute humility and obedience. This he expresses in the Sacrifice of the Mass, carried on throughout the day in total surrender to God's children. I am not a doctor of psychology or mystical theology. But to me, the actual phenomenon of the stigmata seems unconnected here with hysteria, and in any case of minor importance, except in so far as it appears to mark previous and continued conformity to the will of God. Finally, if there is any truth in our Lord's words 'by their fruit you shall know them', then Padre Pio's influence would seem to come under the category of good fruit, for it has already happened many times that

Truth from his lips prevailed with double sway,  
And fools, who came to scoff, remained to pray.



### CORRIGENDUM & ADDENDUM

Readers doubtless were startled to learn from page 500 of our May issue that 'Stalin never drinks'. It was an amusing misprint, but as well as producing chronological difficulties it spoiled the point of the remark, which should have read: 'For Satan too never drinks'.

'THE DEATH OF A PROTESTANT' (p. 474 of the same issue). The acknowledgement should have read: 'By kind permission of the Countess von Moltke and the Oxford University Press.' An English edition of Graf von Moltke's life and works is being prepared by the Oxford University Press.