

## PADRE PIO AT SAN GIOVANNI ROTONDO

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**F**OGGIA must be one of the dustiest, most unattractive towns in Italy; a settlement or conglomeration of utilities dumped at one end of the great drained plain where the only cheerful sights are the trim council villas of a Fascist period housing scheme, standing each in its decent stretch of ground. Occasionally a model village can also be seen bravely starting up round a brand-new modern church.

Driving on beyond Foggia, up into the Gargano peninsula, the mountain landscape grows ever bleaker in the colourlessness of cactus, dust, stone and lime. Above, on the ridge where lie Padre Pio's great white hospital and smaller Capuchin monastery, the mountains stretch more forbidding still.

San Giovanni Rotondo, when at last we reached it, might have been any township in a Western film, with sand and stone and dust massed into larger lumps to form human dwellings. This must be the very back of beyond, the uttermost edge of the world. Nobody surely would come here except as a fugitive—from justice, from fellow-man, from the world. For here is no single redeeming feature, no single attraction except Padre Pio, the stigmatic Friar at the little Capuchin monastery at the top of the village.

To this unprepossessing place flock visitors from all over Italy and beyond. During my week at San Giovanni Rotondo I met Americans, Britons, Latin-Americans, Swiss, French and others, but mostly Italians. Not just 'superstitious peasants', but Italians of every class and degree. They are all there—one soon feels—for the same reason. Without any of the artistic, architectural or scenic beauties found almost anywhere else in Italy, San Giovanni Rotondo boasts in the person of this sixty-five-year-old peasant priest a drawing-power which fills the arid village with tourists. They come in search, I suggest, of very much the same qualities of refreshment and renewal of energy, change of climate and stimulus, which people want from any holiday.

But to San Giovanni people come for a spiritual holiday, in fact for what we call a pilgrimage.

In its lofty desolation the landscape recalls that of Fatima and on arrival I pondered for a moment that God seems to make his modern revelations in such desert heights. The crowds are smaller than at Lourdes or Fatima, but they are at least as dense. Attached to the Capuchin monastery, the little seventeenth-century church of Santa Maria delle Grazie is smaller than any chapel at Lourdes. But the crowd which musters outside the door towards 4 a.m., the reinforcements who debouch from 'Pullman' coaches about 4.15 (having come many miles by bus) are as closely packed as any at Lourdes.

Others have described in detail Padre Pio's Mass; I can only add my testimony. On that first Saturday morning, we walked up the rough road by starlight—a *via crucis* lined by Stations presented by the citizens of Bologna, now disgracefully scrawled over with the familiar pencilled messages; some wired in a belated vain attempt to lock the stable door; one knocked down. Taking our places soon after four o'clock in the morning in the close compact swarm already forming in the dark at the church door, we stood there waiting, pressing—gently as yet—reciting the Rosary; while ever more arrivals adhered to the swarm. At last the door opens and the crowd half falls, half surges through. I think I never knew before what was meant by the phrase, a crowd 'surging'. I learned to yield to that crowd, to lie back on it and float, knowing it would lift me through the narrow door with only faint risk of being spreadeagled on the lintel. Once in, all scramble for a seat, standing-room or space to plant a stool strategically to watch Padre Pio at the small side altar of St Francis.

It is a small church and only those directly behind or beside the altar really see Padre Pio reach the altar with his slightly lumbering gait (the wounds in his feet make walking painful). Vigorous, black-bearded young Capuchins attend him, usher him through the crowd, lecture the congregation: we are to kneel all through Mass, so that those behind may see. '*Questa è la casa di Dio.*' '*Silenzio!*' the monitor repeats. '*S'Inginocchio!*'—but in vain. Once I even saw Padre Pio

turn as he reached the altar rail and harangue the congregation in his rough dialect. Not that the eager congregation keeps up a running commentary. Indeed, never in any other Italian church have I heard so palpable a silence for so large a part of the Mass as at that immensely long slow Mass of Padre Pio's.

It is a Mass arrested in time, confined in space, enclosed in gesture and movement. There is a tendency to discuss it in terms of performance or spectacle. What struck me from the first was nothing spectacular or exotic, nothing rare and strange, but its intimacy and intense naturalness. Most Catholics know that Padre Pio's Mass goes on for one-and-a-half hours. I have always wished Mass could be said more slowly and this seemed to me the Mass said as I had always hoped to hear it said: slowly, with immense reverence but no pose, directly, simply, addressing God at close quarters. The first article I had read about Padre Pio spoke of his showing great emotion but making absolutely no gestures or theatrical display. How foolish! I had thought: both could not be true. But both are true. When we speak of the slowness of his Mass it is not that he reads in laboured 'unctimonious' tones. His Mass is slow, not because it is elaborate or exhibitionist. Far from it. On the contrary, his Latin is rough and plain as it could be. The congregation joins in alertly where it may. Nothing seems laboured or long-drawn-out. It is rather that he takes his time over the most solemn thing in the world; and that at certain passages—the Offertory, the Consecration, the Communion—he seems to turn for some moments aside from the multitude, to go a little further—not away, but inward, a little deeper in to his God, to address him in even closer colloquy.

Only if you sit at the side, almost in front of Padre Pio, do you see the eyes moisten in that broad, benign, patient face till he wipes away the tears.

At the blessing, as he spreads his hands at the *Dominus Vobiscum*, the stigmata on his hands are visible; though when I first attended his Mass, cramped against a pillar or on a minute portable chair in the space behind him, I could not honestly distinguish where the lacy cuffs of his alb finished and the stigmata began. Later, seated at the side

of the altar, on a space varying from two to five inches on the extreme end of a bench, I saw quite close the great dark red patch in the centre of his hands. I saw the colour on his face, watched the controlled pain of his movements.

The more clearly one tries to express any indication of the intensity of the impression he conveys, the further one's account probably strays from suggesting the bareness, the stripped reality of the truth, the sense of watching for the first time a Mass said by somebody giving every word, every formal phrase and gesture of the liturgy its full value, its true meaning, with no extraneous artifice whatever. If the average priest may be thought to enter into the Mass as deeply as he can, Padre Pio give the impression that the Mass, the liturgy, exactly embodies his own vision of and participation in the sacrifice of Calvary. Or again, if the average Mass be thought of as said at the foot of a steep stairway to heaven, Padre Pio's seems to be said at the very threshold and he himself to have the door ajar. His robust, forthright, lucid devotion and simplicity seem to bring the supernatural quite naturally present on the altar, and to lead the motley flock close about him—close, too, to the Christ whose life he lives, not in another world, but there before us among a primitive Christian community.

After Padre Pio himself, the most impressive thing about San Giovanni Rotondo is this primitive Christian community forming round him as he moves, slightly laboriously, from sacristy to Mass, from confessional to high altar for Communion, from sacristy to cloister across the corridor where a fortunate few wait to catch a glimpse of him, to touch his habit or kiss his hand, to ask his blessing on holy objects, or on the sick; a pilgrim community of passengers and even residents who, having come once to taste of Padre Pio's holiness as in the cloister courtyard they drink from the bucket the cold clear water of the monastery well, have forsaken the world and its goods to settle down in this bleak village, so inhospitable but for the holy benevolence transmitted there by this humble peasant Friar.

Never before have I known such an awareness of being 'members of one body'. Partly it was a physical awareness: pressed and swaying together in that concentrated crowd,

all shared indeed in everything that happened to each. Deeper was the corporate sense of identity, of unity of purpose and preoccupation. From first to last, everybody met at San Giovanni was concerned solely with Padre Pio. I had half expected a large sprinkling of sight-seers, the idle curious. But there were none. There is after all nothing to see: only a Mass to enter into, a confession to make.

On arrival at the hotel, a woman on the verandah told us the hour for the *prenotazione*, the registration of applications for confession to Padre Pio. At four-thirty, duly assembled on another verandah, a small company awaited instructions or compared notes—those who had been before telling newcomers of the graces and consolations they had received, or simply of the routine. When I was there, the minimum waiting time was ten days, the maximum twenty-five—except for foreigners, ‘passport in hand’, who were given priority.

The newcomer may hear with some scepticism, or at least cautious reservation, of the cures and preternatural phenomena attributed to Padre Pio. More candidly perhaps he will listen to accounts of Padre Pio’s routine. Accounts vary as to whether he eats nothing at all, or one light meal at mid-day—but none suggests more. He says Office at three a.m., Mass at five; hears confession from eight to ten, then gives Holy Communion, hears confessions again from two to four, on Sundays or feast days gives Benediction at five, and spends his spare time dealing with three or four hundred letters daily.

For a man of sixty-five, in perpetual physical pain, it is a regime too arduous to be borne without exceptional spiritual resources. And yet nobody could look less wasted by austerities and mortifications. Pale in colour, he is in every other respect sturdy and vigorous, a model of *mens sana in corpore sano*.

All the epithets one is tempted to use of Padre Pio need instant qualification. He is rugged but gentle, his radiance is a steady glow, but for the caustic twinkle of humour. At every step he communicates his awareness of the supernatural, yet seems of the earth, earthy, four-square, rock-like, in a way that combines with his broad head and beard to suggest St Peter, as he walks through the crowd, his

irresistible attractive power drawing them to him.

Now that he hardly ever gives interviews for counsel, confession is of course the crux and climax of each individual's pilgrimage. So from the first afternoon, strangers—in the village, in church, or in the hotel—ask if you have been to confession yet; or when you are going. When you are summoned, you collect your ticket at six-thirty on the appointed morning. Then in church you wait in a corner outside Padre Pio's confessional, marked off by benches. At this stage, a surprise is the transformation of the eager, pushing, kindly but insuperably impatient crowd into polite individual penitents. Tickets are compared scrupulously and 'D.3' would not dream of going in before 'D.2'. A long wait gives plenty of time for preparation. But the administration of this sacrament, too, takes on an unusually public aspect. Padre Pio does not normally screen himself, but sits, as it were, on view in the confessional, except if an invalid or cripple goes forward when Padre reaches out to enfold himself and the penitent at his knees in the privacy of his curtain. Otherwise there he sits, in his brown Capuchin habit, for two hours; turning his benign, paternal face first to one side then to the other of the confessional, watched always by the crowd. The absolved penitent emerges, kneels at Padre Pio's feet, kisses the stigmatised hand in its modest mitten, the hand which then cups the penitent's head in a gesture of infinite tenderness and charity.

What has been said will be private, of course. But the penitent becomes in a way public property, a member of the body of hungry souls gathered to seek spiritual nourishment, penance and counsel distributed by the humble Franciscan whose spiritual magnetism has drawn them to this improbable mountainside. No sooner is the penitent up from his prayers than he—or, in the mornings, she—is met by a kindly but insistent barrage of questions: are you happy? content? satisfied?

From the confessional Padre Pio moves to the sacristy to robe immediately for Holy Communion at the High Altar. No orderly rows here, no seats or even queues. Just a solid mass of people (many of those who attend Padre Pio's five o'clock Mass return—perhaps after a sleep—at

ten to receive Holy Communion at his hands) pressing towards the narrow bottleneck at the very approach to the altar steps. A week later, standing in the tiny church of Santa Pudenziana in Rome, and reading the tablets which say that on this site St Peter celebrated his first Masses and administered Holy Communion to the faithful, I thought how similar these first celebrations must have been to Padre Pio's.

Gradually there comes to be something wonderful in the very sharing of experience, the very publicness which at first is so overwhelming. At first, too, the enthusiasm of devotees rouses any latent scepticism, provokes suspicions perhaps of an element of (literally) glorified hero-worship, and inclines one to listen to the doubts of less pious Italian friends whether the cult may not be one of devotion to Padre Pio before God. Of course I suppose that danger may always occur. But it is a danger against which Padre Pio is clearly the strongest bulwark. Once one sees him going about his labours, his service of God, one can have no further doubt. Waves of silliness may rise about him; but all such waves will break against this rock, centred and established in Christ.

Fr Martindale has noticed the resemblance between Padre Pio's parents and those of Francisco and Jacinta Marto of Fatima. I well remember how the shining integrity, the concentrated goodness of 'Ti Marto' and his wife put Fatima into perspective, anchored it to reality. So the intense sanity, normalcy of Padre Pio at the centre steadies the agitation of enthusiasm that blows about his rugged head.

A week in this community wholly concerned in the search for holiness is an extraordinary experience in this dark age. At the table on one side of us in the hotel was a smart Sicilian woman whom you might expect to find at any Lido resort. She was bright, gay, practical, modern; at a guess, probably ran a dressmaking or accessory establishment. There she was, like everyone else, to confess to Padre Pio; and except for one day of cheerful Sicilian company, she turned up daily in, I'm sure, unaccustomed solitude waiting her turn. Except at meals, I only met her when I, literally speaking, bumped into her in church.

On our other side at table was a young couple who pro-

duced a pocket radio set to give them music while they ate; they too were awaiting their turn for confession.

Coming out of church, one may visit the very welcome mobile coffee stall. The coffee vendor, while he dispenses incomparable *espressos*, will also discuss his own gratitude to Padre Pio. Sitting on the low stone road verge, aged crones in dusty black ask if you have been to confession and found satisfaction, expatiate on their own gratitude for having found this man of God. A youth of twenty-two, a 'street-corner' type, was so moved by Padre Pio's mere promise of absolution that he was eager to tell any of us how he had wept in the confessional and felt the burden of his sin already slipping from him.

Two of the conversation pieces imprinted on my memory by that week in a Christian community most vividly evoke San Giovanni. In the hotel bar one morning, returned from Communion, we sat taking our breakfast of coffee and buns. A missionary tertiary from Rome came over to ask for some tips on English pronunciation; she was in San Giovanni in the hopes of counsel from Padre Pio. So was the wealthy and attractive Argentine lady with her family at the next table. As foreigners these latter would benefit from priority in the queue. They hoped to consult Padre Pio, and had also come to make a contribution to his hospital—the 'Home for the Relief of Suffering'. The barman was a Tuscan who told us he had come from Tuscany to work here near Padre Pio. The cashier—who also sold the picture postcards of Padre Pio which begin by disconcerting until one has seen the original for oneself and learned to prize the sight—was having an earnest discussion with another of Padre Pio's 'spiritual children' about the latest phenomena attributed to him.

A last picture is of our departure by bus. We had all come out of church from Holy Communion shortly before. Towards mid-day a 'Pullman' for Foggia left from the piazza before the church. In a scrum that seemed quite familiar following the daily scramble for a place in church, my companion and I got in. After the relative quiet of the church and Holy Communion, pandemonium broke loose. It was one of those journeys to dispel all suspicion of exagg-



eration in the 'neo-realistic' Italian films. Baskets, babies, pushing and pulling, higher-pitched and more piercing argument (why are Italian speaking voices reputed to be beautiful?); and just in case there should not be enough noise to make the passengers feel at home, somebody turned on the radio.

Among the standing passengers were two young men with vulgar-looking comics tucked under their arms. Interest round them increased, and I became aware that what they were proposing for admiration was a small crucifix said to contain a fragment of blood-soaked dressing from Padre Pio's wounds—from his socks or the cloth laid on his side (such objects may no longer be made or sold, all the cloths from his wounds being now locked away in the monastery). Always the motif running through every conversation is the sufferings of Padre Pio—'*che soffra, che soffra!*'

For myself San Giovanni and Padre Pio meant primarily two revelations. First, I had never before had such a lively sense of membership in one body. Next, a glimpse of what is meant by sharing in the sufferings of our Lord must be a common revelation through Padre Pio's own example to all the followers he draws to San Giovanni.

Clearly the pilgrims—and all those who came years ago as pilgrims and stayed, giving up their worldly goods to live in the orbit of Padre Pio—look on him as a saint. The Church of course is prudent. Nobody is canonised during his lifetime, and the Church is prepared to wait without either denying or affirming the many stories of Padre Pio's healings, of his bilocation, of his 'perfumed odour'; but perhaps we may accept Pope Benedict XV's comment in 1921: 'Padre Pio is in truth an extraordinary man, of those whom God sends from time to time to earth to convert mankind'. The life of the community grown up round Padre Pio in that desolate corner of Italy seems very like the life which gathered round any of the saints in their life-time, to replenish spiritual energy at a source of holiness, to answer the holy man's call to penance, to share in his sufferings and in his visible life in Christ.