

St. Padre Pio¹

From his early childhood, it was evident that Padre Pio had a deep piety. His parents first learned of his desire to become a priest in 1897. A young Capuchin friar was canvassing the countryside seeking donations. Padre Pio was drawn to this spiritual man and told his parents, "I want to be a friar... with a beard." His parents traveled to Morcone, a community thirteen miles north of Pietrelcina, to investigate if the friars would be interested in having their son. The Capuchins were interested, but Padre Pio would need more education than his three years of public schooling. In order to finance the private tutor needed to educate Padre Pio, his father went to America to find work.

Within a month of his ordination (September 7, 1910), as Padre Pio was praying in the Piana Romana, Jesus and Mary appeared to him and gave him the wounds of Christ, the Stigmata. He asked Jesus to take away "the annoyance," adding, "I do want to suffer, even to die of suffering, but all in secret." The wounds went away and the supernatural life of Padre Pio remained a secret...for a while.

In July, 1918, Pope Benedict XV urged all Christians to pray for an end to the World War. On July 27, Padre Pio offered himself as a victim for the end of the war. Days later between August 5 -7, Padre Pio had a vision in which Christ appeared and pierced his side. As a result of this experience, Padre Pio had a physical wound in his side. The experience has been identified as a "transverberation" or piercing of the heart indicating the union of love with God.

A few weeks later, on September 20, 1918, Padre Pio was praying in the choir loft in the Church of Our Lady of Grace, when the same Being who appeared to him on August 5, appeared again. It was the wounded Christ. When the ecstasy ended, Padre Pio had received the Visible Stigmata, the five wounds of Christ, which would stay with him for his remaining 50 years.

By early 1919, word about the stigmata began to spread to the outside world. Over the years countless people, including physicians, examined Padre Pio's wounds. For Padre Pio's doctors, the wounds created much confusion as they could not find any natural cause for the wounds. Padre Pio was not interested in the physicians' attempts to explain his stigmata. He accepted it as a gift from God, though he would have preferred to suffer the pains of Christ's Passion without the world knowing.

God used Padre Pio – especially the news of his stigmata – to give people hope as they began to rebuild their life after the war. Padre Pio and his spiritual gifts of the stigmata, perfume, prophecy and bilocation was a sign of God in their midst and led people back to their Faith.

The phenomenon of bilocation is one of the most remarkable gifts attributed to Padre Pio. His appearances on various of the continents are attested by numerous eye witnesses, who either saw him or smelled the odors characteristically associated with his presence, described by some as roses. The phenomenon of odor (sometimes called the odor of sanctity) is itself well established in Padre Pio's case. The odor was especially strong from the blood coming from his wounds. Investigation showed that he used absolutely no fragrances or anything that could produce these odors. The odors often occurred when people called upon his intercession in prayer and continue to this day.

¹ Taken from <http://www.ewtn.com/padrepio/> and http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=311

Among the most remarkable of the documented cases of bilocation was the Padre's appearance in the air over San Giovanni Rotondo during World War II. While southern Italy remained in Nazi hands American bombers were given the job of attacking the city of San Giovanni Rotondo. However, when they appeared over the city and prepared to unload their munitions a brown-robed friar appeared before their aircraft. All attempts to release the bombs failed. In this way Padre Pio kept his promise to the citizens that their town would be spared. Later on, when an American airbase was established at Foggia a few miles away, one of the pilots of this incident visited the friary and found to his surprise the little friar he had seen in the air that day over San Giovanni.

As to how Padre Pio with God's help accomplished such feats, the closest he ever came to an explanation of bilocation was to say that it occurred "by an extension of his personality."

Padre Pio had the ability to read the hearts of the penitents who flocked to him for confession which he heard for ten or twelve hours per day. Padre Pio used the confessional to bring both sinners and devout souls closer to God; he would know just the right word of counsel or encouragement that was needed.

As his spiritual influence increased, so did the voices of his detractors. Accusations against Padre Pio poured into the Holy Office (today the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith). By June 1922, restrictions were placed on the public's access to Padre Pio.

On June 9, 1931, the Feast of Corpus Christi, Padre Pio was ordered by the Holy See to desist from all activities except the celebration of the Mass, which was to be in private. By early 1933, Pope Pius XI ordered the Holy See to reverse its ban on Padre Pio's public celebration of Mass, saying, "I have not been badly disposed toward Padre Pio, but I have been badly informed."

Upon his death in 1968, the wounds were no longer visible. In fact, there was no scarring and the skin was completely renewed. He had predicted 50 years prior that upon his death the wounds would heal.

Small group discussion questions:

- 1) What inspires you about Padre Pio? How does he make you want to grow in holiness?
- 2) Sometimes I think we fear that holiness will not be attractive, but Padre Pio attracted people to himself from all over the world and his "fragrance of holiness" shows that holiness is beautiful. Do you believe that holiness is attractive?
- 3) Padre Pio says, "Whoever does not meditate, is like someone who never looks in the mirror before going out, doesn't bother to see if he's tidy, and may go out dirty without knowing it. The person who meditates and turns his mind to God, who is the mirror of his soul, seeks to know his faults, tries to correct them, moderates his impulses, and puts his conscience in order." How important do you think self-knowledge is in the spiritual life? Do you have a time each day that you could commit to practicing meditation?
- 4) Padre Pio also says, "Pray, hope, and don't worry." How does worry keep you from joy? How does prayer help you not to worry? Why is it difficult to stop worrying? Do you believe that God is trustworthy? Why or why not?
- 5) What else strikes you about St. Padre Pio? How does he inspire you to grow / change?