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Pio

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requires one such miracle for beatification, and one more for canonization.

Who was Padre Pio?

Padre Pio (May 25, 1887-Sept. 23, 1968) was born Francesco Forgione in a farming community in Pietrelcina, southern Italy. In 1903 he joined the Brothers of St. Francis at the Morcone monastery and took a new name in honor of St. Pio V, patron saint of Pietrelcina. He was ordained a priest in 1910. He later moved to a friary in San Giovanni Rotondo.

He became the first known stigmatized priest Sept. 20, 1918, when visible, bleeding wounds in both feet, both hands and his side appeared. They remained with him the rest of his life, and according to some people, bled as much as a cup of blood every day. It is also said his blood had the smell of perfume.

Padre Pio wrote to his spiritual adviser in 1918, saying he feared he might bleed to death if Jesus did not relieve him.

"I will raise my voice and will not stop imploring him until in his mercy he takes away, not the wound or the pain," he wrote, "which is impossible since I wish to be inebriated with pain, but these outward signs which cause me such embarrassment and unbearable humiliation."

Padre Pio was credited with possessing inner signs — special gifts — including "reading hearts," or knowing details of their lives without being told of them.

Mario Bruschi of Manhattan told the *Catholic Courier* he experienced this. Bruschi recently founded the National Office of the Devotees of Padre Pio, to promote Padre Pio.

In 1957 Bruschi spent 10 days in Padre Pio's village, waiting four days with his mother for his number to be called for confession with the priest — who'd spend long hours in the confessional.

Once in the confessional, Bruschi said, "He saw my hands were shaking, and all of a sudden touched my hands, and said, 'Calm yourself, my son.'"

"He began asking me questions about my sins. I said yes father, no father." The priest was revealing Bruschi's sins, he said.

"When it was all over, I didn't want to leave him. You have this feeling you love his company. It was like he was penetrating my soul."

However, the padre had not given Bruschi absolution. Bruschi tried several times to obtain it, once greeting the priest near his cell.

"I knelt down. ... I said, 'You may have forgotten to give me absolution,'" he recalled. "He tapped me on the head, and blessed me." But again, no absolution.

Finally, on one last meeting, he said, "I want you to know I am leaving for America tomorrow, will you give me your blessing?" The priest did.

"Because he did not give me absolu-

tion, it helped me realize later in life not to take God for granted," he said. "When you commit sins, you are offending God. So he got me into the habit of going to confession.... Because he did not give me absolution, he helped put me back on the straight and narrow.

"It was the most exhilarating and rewarding experience of my life," Bruschi added.

"When he looked at you, you felt his eyes piercing right through you," Father Armand Dasseville, OFM Cap, told the *Courier*. The national director of Padre Pio Prayer Groups added, "His eyes were like Archbishop Sheen's. Those eyes penetrate."

Church restrictions

On and off between 1923 and 1933, the church forbade Padre Pio to have visitors and to say Mass in public — despite throngs of people who fought this — and to hear confessions, Father Schug affirmed. Even when these restrictions were lifted, he was forbidden to write.

This was a shame, noted Father Sebastian Falcone, a former Capuchin who was incardinated in the Rochester Diocese, because "his ability to use words was very, very significant."

In fact, several volumes have been compiled of Padre Pio's letters from his early days, including words of spiritual counsel.

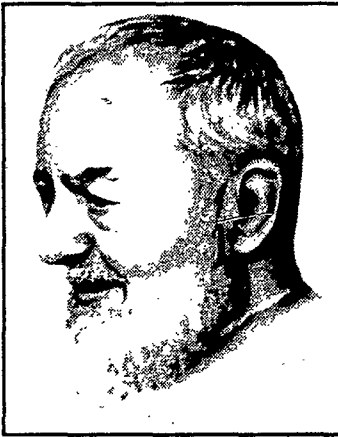
Back during graduate studies in New York in the 1940s, Father Falcone noted, he became aware of the restrictions. "Within the Capuchin order it was forbidden for members of that order to stop by that monastery to visit him," he said. "A number of friars who did so had to do so on the QT."

One such priest gave him a piece of a glove Padre Pio wore.

However, Father Falcone, now a professor at St. Bernard's Institute, questioned whether he should even mention this — "just mentioning it begins to excite people to ask the wrong questions."

"The important thing about the stigmatist is how he lived out his life," he said.

Both Fathers Falcone and Schug noted that studies of Padre Pio's stigmata yielded varied conclusions. The wounds may have been divine, or a result of hysteria or self-infliction, for example.



"I am inclined to believe in the case of Padre Pio there is something that cannot be just explained by purely human factors," Father Falcone said, however. "The man's quality of life, his willingness to be ready to accept what people demanded of him, his need to say Mass early in the morning before too many groups could gather, his inability (due to prohibitions) to travel, the consistent display of what I de-

scribe as basic acceptance of that condition would describe to me, here's what is a superior soul."

However, he has reservations about the beatification.

"I don't know whether a) the church needs this, b) Padre Pio needs this, or whether it will increase the faith of his devotees," he said. The Second Vatican Council, he noted, "made it clear we are all called to holiness."

Father Schug said Padre Pio has been analyzed and scrutinized his whole life. "He was in the eye of the hurricane his whole life but was never touched by it. His own archbishop was unfrocked."

That archbishop, who had earlier declared Padre Pio's stigmata a fraud, was not a reliable witness and was "viciously hostile" to Padre Pio, he said. In addition, Pope Pius XI has said that he himself was not ill-disposed toward Padre Pio, but had been ill-informed about him, Father Schug said. It was under his leadership the church restrained Padre Pio, but also lifted restrictions in 1933.

Father Schug and Father Falcone also concurred that the church was not being hostile to Padre Pio.

Father Schug said he believes restrictions were placed on the priest because "the Vatican was trying to investigate Padre Pio and it was determined the tempest must be quieted down for the church to do its work."

Noting the hordes of followers today, he added, "It never worked."

Devoted followers

More than 200,000 followers belong to Padre Pio Prayer Groups. About 60,000 have helped promote his cause through the Padre Pio Foundation of America. Thousands of pilgrims make their way every year to the National Centre, the on-

ly such large devotional center to Padre Pio in the country, according to Father Schug. Located near Allentown, it features an information center, chapel, gift shop and personal effects of Padre Pio including brown woolen gloves.

In Auburn, Mike Rosa of St. Francis Church, displays Padre Pio statues, pictures, posters and other items in his house. He prays to Padre Pio constantly, he said, and cannot help from telling stories about Padre Pio — from his bilocating, "appearing" to pilots during World War I, "appearing" to hear confessions and comfort the sick in far-off countries.

Father Albert Shamon of Fleming recalled that his late brother, Father Edward Shamon, went to confession with Padre Pio in the late 1950s or early 1960s. Father Ed returned home with a handkerchief of flakes of skin that had fallen from the friar's hands.

"He was very impressed with him, as we all are," Father Shamon said. "We joke about it, the place was so crowded for Mass you couldn't get in. What he did, you have to know my brother, he said to the women (attending) 'I'm the papal legate,' and they made room for him."

In 1990, Father Shamon, on his 50th jubilee, celebrated Mass over Padre Pio's tomb at the monastery. The friars were gracious to him and his group, he said, and showed them where Padre Pio had lived, the window from which he waved to visitors and the chair where he died.

"They welcomed me warmly," he said. He added that Padre Pio had had "many encounters with the devil. They were violent encounters, but he was not afraid." Stories have been told of Padre Pio facing the devil in the form of a large black dog late at night in his room, and of staying up all night because of such encounters.

As an archbishop, Pope John Paul II had written asking Padre Pio to pray for a woman dying of cancer in 1962; he reported later she was cured. The pope, who as a young priest had met Padre Pio, also has made pilgrimages to his home.

Father Schug, who never met Padre Pio, said he's excited about his beatification, "But with a restraint. My excitement is more an appreciation in having met the man in spirit. ... He means a lot to me. He can mean even more to a whole world that does not know how to cope with pain."

Praying to Padre Pio has offered hope to many, he said, adding that he has been told of his appearances to people who were suffering and even suicidal.

"If anyone is looking for a solution like that — more and more scientists are telling us the solution is religious — here we have a good shepherd. He was a man of intense pain. He couldn't even walk, only shuffle. And he was happy."

"Few people hurting today I would call happy. They are calling Dr. Kevorkian. They are defeatists in their pain."

"But you can see some of the difficulties popularizing somebody like this."

Events

Events celebrating the May 2 beatification of Padre Pio include:

• Eternal Word Television Network will carry the ceremony live at 4:30 a.m. and an encore at 6 p.m. Sunday, May 2; "At the Gates of Heaven" on the cause for canonization of Padre Pio, at

9 a.m. Saturday, May 1, and 4 p.m. Sunday, May 2; and a host of other specials May 1-2.

• The National Centre for Padre Pio, Barto, Pa., will broadcast the beatification live at 4 a.m. Sunday, May 2, by satellite; other events May 1-3 will include blessings with a glove of Padre Pio's, Italian-language talks and Mass.

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