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Padre Pio

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Padre Pio.

Before he left San Giovanni Rotondo, Father McNamara had a chance to speak to Padre Pio about something that concerned him. Padre Pio seemed to know what Father McNamara was going to ask before the words were out of his mouth.

"He gave me the answer quickly. I'm sure the Lord told him what I would ask," Father McNamara said.

Father McNamara said Padre Pio was a deeply spiritual man, and his canonization "will be one of the greatest events in Rome."

And for San Giovanni Rotondo as well. For devotees of Padre Pio, the growth of San Giovanni Rotondo is proof that the friar's message of penance and prayer hits home with modern men and women. But others are concerned that the message is being obscured by the industry that has sprung up in his wake, which they say the saint would not have wanted.

Padre Pio was known for spending 10-12 hours daily hearing confessions, and much of the rest of his time in prayer in a small bare cell or before a wooden crucifix in the monastery church. He put Christ's sacrifice on the cross at the center of his prayer life and, for most of his life, bore wounds in his hands, feet and side like those suffered by Christ.

That suffering is central to his appeal, said Capuchin Father Gerardo Di Flumeri, vice postulator for Padre Pio's canonization cause.

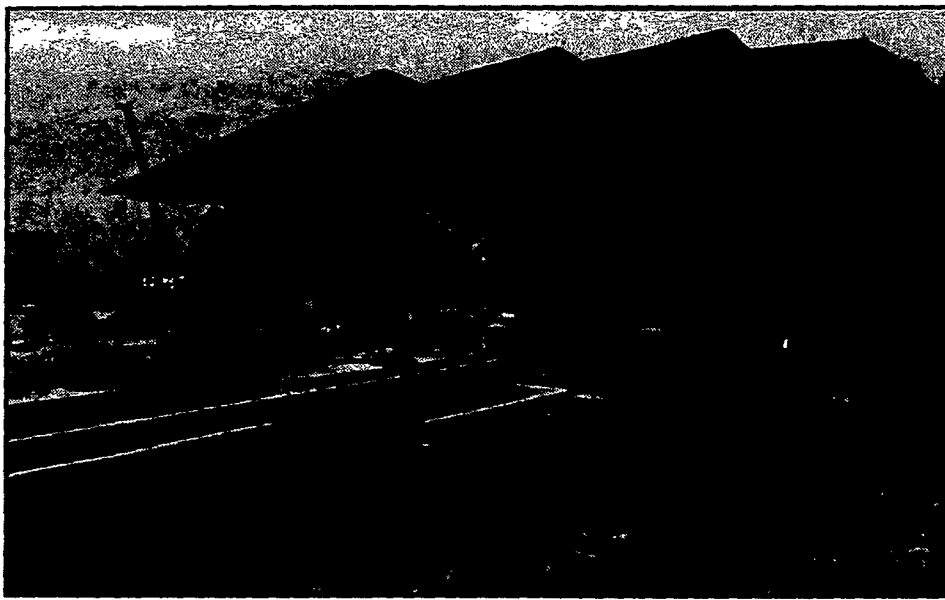
"People saw and see in him the imprinted stigmata of Christ crucified. And Jesus never fails to attract," he said.

In addition, many people are drawn to Padre Pio because he is known as a powerful intercessor for divine favors, Father Di Flumeri said.

"The Lord certainly concedes many graces to Padre Pio," he said.

The supplicants have included the future Pope John Paul, who in 1962 as archbishop of Krakow, wrote to Padre Pio to ask him to pray for a Polish woman with throat cancer. Eleven days later he wrote again to report that she suddenly and inexplicably had been cured.

Even today, such cures are reported regularly in Italian newspapers. Among the latest is the case of a 30-year-old Sicilian woman, paralyzed for five years following a car accident, who baffled doctors in Feb-



John Norton/CNS

A 8,000-seat church is being built by the Capuchins in the southern Italian village of San Giovanni Rotondo. Expected to be completed in May 2003, the church will accommodate nearly 8 million pilgrims that annually visit the home of Padre Pio.

ruary by suddenly being able to walk. She said Padre Pio had appeared to her in a dream.

Requests for physical healing are especially popular in San Giovanni Rotondo because Padre Pio's hospital is just a short wheelchair ride across a flagstone square to the church where he is buried. It is not unusual to see patients in hospital gowns in the church crypt, whispering prayers through a grate to where his body rests under a three-and-a-half-ton black granite block.

But Capuchins at the shrine, who offer pilgrims request cards to place on Padre Pio's tomb, say visitors mostly ask for spiritual favors.

"There are requests for material graces: Heal my father; find a job for my son," said Father Di Flumeri. "But the majority are spiritual requests: Make me love Jesus; make me have a good and holy death; call my son back from the evil path."

Even after Padre Pio's death, "he is continuing his mission of spiritual care for souls," Father Di Flumeri said.

The priest, who joined the San Giovanni monastery during the last years of Padre Pio's life, said the future saint was well aware of the superstitious and exaggerated devotion toward him among some of his followers.

Padre Pio once joked that the streets outside the shrine were full of mentally ill peo-

ple and added with a laugh, "I am their president," Father Di Flumeri said.

The charitable works Padre Pio began have flourished under a steady stream of pilgrims' donations. The area around the shrine sprouts with construction cranes, and its roads are ringed with mud tracks from cement trucks and dump trucks.

Shaped like a nautilus shell, the church centers on one mammoth supporting pillar that stretches from the roof down through the crypt into the ground. The Capuchins are examining the possibility of placing Padre Pio's tomb in the pillar's base, symbolizing his centrality to the church and the shrine, said Aldo Paranzino, the project's general contractor.

Apart from the shrine, though, most of what Padre Pio founded is no longer in Capuchin hands. Before his death the monk ceded to the Vatican all his activities, including the hospital, which is called The House for the Relief of Suffering.

Founded in 1956 and built in part with U.S. post-war reconstruction money, the hospital now has more than 1,000 beds and treats nearly 900,000 patients annually. State-funded construction is under way on a new multistory building to house the hospital's outpatient services and a laboratory for research on hereditary and rare diseases.

The Vatican also owns and oversees extensive olive orchards and dairy and cattle

farms. The farms produce olive oil, meat and dairy products for the hospital and for the commercial market.

"What does Padre Pio mean for this city?" asked Antonio Squarcella, mayor of San Giovanni Rotondo. "Everything."

According to Squarcella, annual economic activity related to Padre Pio — from the hospital to souvenir stands — measures in the hundreds of millions of dollars. Half of the city's 180 hotels were built in the last three years and another 34 were under construction in March, he said.

"This town enjoys a special privilege on the part of providence," he said.

Local church authorities accept the commercialization that has sprung up around Padre Pio as inevitable, but some pilgrims are bothered by it.

The area around the shrine is a sea of hotels, souvenir shops and snack bars. Gypsy women, spaced 20 feet apart along the sidewalk, tug on pilgrims' sleeves to beg for money. Restaurant hawkers compete to lure pilgrim groups to "the best tourist menu" in town.

Dozens of souvenir stands fill the piazza below the shrine, offering Padre Pio pencils, Padre Pio rosaries, Padre Pio pictures and Padre Pio statues of every dimension, from a \$2,000 life-size version to a \$1 pocket-size.

"Look! All you see are hotels, restaurants, cafes," said Giannetta Alida, a 27-year-old from Sicily who was standing in the shrine's square with her fiancé, Domenico Verona. She said they had been fascinated with Padre Pio since seeing an Italian television movie on his life last year and decided to make the pilgrimage.

"I expected to find a place of peace. I don't know, lots of greenery and nature. But instead it's all hotels. We're very disappointed," she said.

Father Di Flumeri, however, is fairly sure that Padre Pio could have foreseen what the shrine has become today. He said the future saint was an experienced confessor, after all, well aware of the effects of "human misery."

Excesses aside, Father Di Flumeri said, the growth of San Giovanni Rotondo around the shrine even reflects in some way Padre Pio's style of holiness, which was expressed in concern not just for the supernatural but also the physical well-being of people.

"Saints, who truly love God and neighbor, put themselves to work like the Good Samaritan," he said.

Contributing to this story was Jennifer Ficaglia in Rochester.

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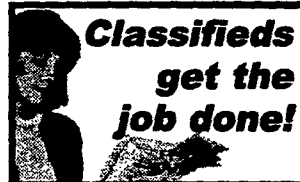
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