

WORLD & NATION

Padre Pio canonized, afforded special ranking

By John Norton
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — In one of the largest liturgies in Vatican history, Pope John Paul II canonized Padre Pio da Pietralcina, saying the Capuchin friar's spirituality of suffering was a valuable model for modern times.

Underscoring his message, the pope announced at the end of the June 16 Mass that he was making Padre Pio's Sept. 23 feast day an "obligatory memorial" on the church's general liturgical calendar, a rank shared by only one other 20th-century saint, Maximilian Kolbe, also a Franciscan.

More than 300,000 people, according to police, filled St. Peter's Square and surrounding streets in sweltering 90-degree heat; in improvised remarks after the two-and-a-half-hour ceremony, the pope thanked the pilgrims for their "courage" and sacrifice in attending.

In his homily, the pope said the holiness of Padre Pio — who was well-known for bearing the stigmata, or bleeding wounds of Christ — could not be understood without the friar's attachment to asceticism and the crucified Christ's suffering.

"The life and mission of Padre Pio give testimony that difficulty and suffering, if accepted with love, transform themselves into a privileged path of sanctity, opening toward a larger good that is known only to the Lord," he said.

He said Padre Pio's "spirituality of the cross" was still valid today. "Our time needs to rediscover its value in order to open hearts to hope," the pope said.

Padre Pio, who died in 1968 at the age of 81, was well known as a dedicated confessor. The pope departed from his prepared text to recall that he visited the Italian friar for the sacrament of reconciliation when he was a young theology student in 1947.

Referring to Padre Pio's reputation for sometimes refusing absolution, the pope said that this "apparent harshness" helped penitents to realize the seriousness of their



A tapestry depicting Padre Pio hangs from the central balcony on the facade of St. Peter's Basilica during his canonization ceremony June 16.

sin and sincerely repent, and that the penitents "almost always returned for the pacifying embrace of sacramental forgiveness."

He said he hoped Padre Pio's example would inspire priests around the world to exercise their ministry in the confessional "with joy and diligence."

The pope said Padre Pio saw prayer as his most powerful "weapon" and noted that the friar founded the House for the Relief of Suffering, a large hospital for the poor.

"Prayer and charity: This is the most concrete synthesis of Padre Pio's teaching, which today is re-proposed to everybody," he said.

Thousands of tour buses began dropping pilgrims at St. Peter's Square at 5 a.m. for the Mass, which began at 10. Other pilgrims arrived from around Italy in 50 special trains.

The crowd at the Mass, many wearing

yellow caps or white fisherman-style hats to ward off the searing sun, clapped and cheered when the pope pronounced the Latin formula of canonization.

Organizers handed out hundreds of thousands of cartons of free mineral water, and volunteers with fire hoses sprayed a cooling mist over the crowds. Cardinals and bishops near the altar shaded themselves with large white and yellow umbrellas.

Tens of thousands more pilgrims followed the canonization by live audio link from a piazza in San Giovanni Rotondo, the southern Italian town where Padre Pio spent most of his life and is buried. As he was formally proclaimed a saint, they cheered and released thousands of blue and yellow balloons into the air.

Investigated and cleared during several Vatican inquiries into charges of sexual misconduct and fraud, Padre Pio has developed

a worldwide following of devotees, and 8 million people visit his tomb annually.

Watching the ceremony from the shade of a building, Antonio Sergi, an Italian in his mid-30s, said he was devoted to Padre Pio "because he is a very humble saint. He came from simple people and was always among the poor."

Sergi, like many in the crowd trusting in Padre Pio's reputation for granting favors, said he had traveled from his southern Italian home in Catanzaro to pray for a small miracle.

"I've asked him to intercede to allow my wife and I to have a baby," he said, adding with a smile, "I hope that after today ..."

Also among the pilgrims was Dr. Wanda Poltawska. The pope, as an auxiliary bishop in 1962, sent Padre Pio a letter asking him to pray for Poltawska, who had been diagnosed with malignant throat cancer. Eleven days later he wrote again to say the cancer had disappeared.

Despite the heat, the pope held up well during the Mass, though he appeared to tire toward the end. He did not personally give first Communion as planned to Matteo Colella, the 8-year-old boy whose medically inexplicable cure from multiple organ failure in 2000 was deemed the miracle for Padre Pio's canonization.

After the Mass, the pope traveled in his popemobile around the square, waving at the cheering crowds. Later in the evening, pilgrims gathered for a celebratory musical performance in the Paul VI audience hall and watched a fireworks display over the Janiculum Hill next to the Vatican.

The ranking of obligatory memorial accorded to Padre Pio means the celebration must be observed in Masses and the Liturgy of the Hours on the day it occurs unless a solemnity or feast that takes precedence falls on the same day.

The liturgy was the 45th canonization ceremony of Pope John Paul's nearly 24-year pontificate and brought to 461 the number of people he has proclaimed saints.

Baltimore Catholics claim miraculous cures

By Rachel Richmond
Catholic News Service

BALTIMORE — Catholics in the Baltimore Archdiocese say they have experienced miracles and special graces as a result of the intercession of the newly canonized Padre Pio da Pietralcina.

Edward Simmons, a parishioner at St. Mark's in Fallston, said doctors could not find the fist-sized tumor on his back just moments before his scheduled surgery in the early 1970s.

When his wife, Mary, realized her husband faced serious surgery, she immediately turned to prayer. She had heard of Padre Pio, the Italian Capuchin friar who had become famous for intercessory heal-

ings since his death in 1968. So the two prayed a novena to him, hoping for the best.

Simmons, 63, was on the operating table when the surgeon told him to get off the table and go home, his wife told *The Catholic Review*, Baltimore's archdiocesan newspaper.

He and his wife, both secular Franciscans, now belong to a local Padre Pio Fraternity formed by Mary Simmons. The members of the fraternity planned to watch the canonization on television and afterward have breakfast with the homeless.

"Padre Pio has a really almost universal appeal. It seems like he's touched a lot of people's lives," said Capuchin Franciscan Father John Harvey, pastor of the multi-parish community of St. Peter the Apostle,

St. Jerome and St. Martin in the Baltimore Archdiocese. The priest was planning to hang a picture of Padre Pio in all three parishes June 16.

Opal Serjeant, a parishioner at St. Margaret Church in Bel Air, was scheduled for surgery for back pain two months ago. She said her pain disappeared immediately after Mary Simmons, her dental hygienist, prayed to Padre Pio.

When Mary Simmons heard of Serjeant's condition, she placed oil on the woman's forehead and they prayed to the Italian mystic.

Serjeant drove home without pain and was able to eat her lunch sitting down, which she had not been able to do previously.

"This happened in just over one hour," she said of the healing. "So you know it has to be a miracle."

Serjeant had never heard of Padre Pio before her healing but "I certainly pray to him every day now," she said.

William Carrigan, a Maryland philanthropist, met Padre Pio while working with the Red Cross in Italy during World War II and became a personal friend. When Mount de Sales Academy, a Baltimore all-



A pilgrim touches the hands on a statue of Blessed Padre Pio in San Giovanni Rotondo in southern Italy June 9.

girls high school, was in danger of closing because of financial troubles, Carrigan provided funds to repair the school roof, open a computer lab and outfit a new library.

Carrigan had only one condition: that the library be named for Padre Pio and a large mosaic of him be hung in the school. The mosaic was made from a picture Carrigan had taken of Padre Pio.

Maria Nauman, then a de Sales student and now director of communications for the school, said "At the time we were like Padre who? But we were like, OK, whatever."

"He's really brought so many great graces here," Nauman said. Local prayer groups occasionally visit the high school to see the mosaic and relics of the saint that are preserved there.

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