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Padre Pio, the Stigmata Priest (5/25/1887-9/3/1968)

I first heard of Padre Pio 3 years ago when I visited the noted German stigmatize Theresa Neumann. While discussing this Neumann with friends I was informed that a second person, a priest of the Capuchin order living in Italy also bore the stigmata or wounds of Christ.

Having developed an interest in stigmatism through my visits with Theresa Neumann, I decided that if it were at all possible, I must visit this priest. The Stigmatists are by no means common and to find two of them living in the same generation is indeed unique.

A Word on Stigmatism

What is stigmatism? A stigmatize is one who bears wounds on the hands, feet, and side similar in character to those born by Christ at the crucifixion. These wounds may be either visible or invisible and are usually accompanied by great pain. In the case of Padre Pio, the wounds remained invisible for three years, 1915 to 1918, after which they took a visible form. The wounds have not always been limited to 5 in number. Theresa Neumann for instance had in addition to the five general wounds, six wounds on her head representing the crown of thorns and a large wound on her shoulder from the weight of the cross.

Stigmatism must be approached very cautiously. There are number of instances in history where persons both religious and non-religious have claimed stigmatism only to be exposed as frauds. Theologians also contend that stigmatism maybe diabolic as well as Divine in origin. It should also be noted that although several saints in the history of the Catholic Church have been blessed with the stigmata, they were declared and canonized saints on the virtues of their holy lives that they led and not necessarily on the fact that they had the stigmata. In some cases where there was absolutely no reason to question the divine origin of the stigmata, no mention of the stigmata is made in the canonization. Further emphasizing this point is the fact that in canonizing saints, Church officials have purposely declined from authenticating any physical phenomena, normal or abnormal. The fact that a person has wounds on certain parts of his or her body does not necessarily qualify them as saintly any more than a lady without arms would merit the title of Venus De Mile.

San Giovanni Rotondo

If you take a map and study the narrow strip of land shaped like a boot which we know of as Italy, you will find San Giovanni Rotondo is located at the south of Italy near the city of Foggia on a small peninsular of land which forms a spur just north of the heel of the boot.

I arrived in Foggia by train from Rome on a hot September 1963 morning. On arriving I inquired about the transportation to San Giovanni Rotondo and was told that a bus left every hour from the train station. I usually spend such waiting time visiting points of interest, but Foggia is one of those few cities where there is absolutely nothing to see so I wasted away the hour at the train station. Foggia's buildings are relatively modern since it was destroyed by allied bombers during the last war. It holds the distinction of having been the most devastated city in Italy. Some 25 thousand of its inhabitants lost their lives during the bombing. While traveling the 20 miles to San Giovanni Rotondo, I was able to observe the land and its people. An elderly gentleman sitting beside me on the bus who spoke some

English, was helpful in introducing me to his native land. For the most part southern Italy is very poor, and this region is no exception. A tourist trade caused by Padre Pio has brought a better economy for some of the people but generally the living standards are far below that of northern Italy and the remainder of Europe. A strip of fertile land between Foggia and the base of the mountain which leads to San Giovanni Rotondo is devoted mainly to raising grapes which produce the fine wine for which this region has long been famous. As we climb the mountain around narrow roads in hairpin turns, the land becomes too rocky and steep to produce grapes. Scattered over the land between mounds of stones are Olive and nut trees which seemed to do rather well in this district. A few cattle are kept on the gentler slopes with sheep and goats occupying the higher more rugged terrain. To the tourists, the climate seems excellent and the countryside scenic but there are those who live here it represents a constant struggle for survival, a day-to-day conflict against the elements of nature. The rain from sudden spring showers, unable to seep into the rocky land rushes down the steep slopes carrying with it the precious topsoil. Little of the rain is utilized in the valley as it is quickly absorbed by the mountains of sand. The summers are hot and dry, and the blazing sun dries every blade of grass to a crisp. The only sign of wildlife is a small rock lizard which manages to eke out a living on insects and escapes the sun by burrowing beneath the rocks. The winter brings sharp spells of cold and sudden snow storms that sometimes isolate the San Giovanni Rotondo from the rest of the world for weeks because of its location on a peninsula which juts out from the Adriatic Sea, San Giovanni Rotondo is a natural target for the harsh winter winds which blow across from Yugoslavia and Albania.

Despite the elements of nature, the grapes thrive in the valleys and the Olive and nut trees generally yield an abundant crop. This is the land long known as "Gargano" where Francesco Forgione (Padre Pio) was born in the village of Pietrelcina on the 25th of May 1887. His parents Orazio and Maria Forgione eked out a living for themselves and their children on a small plot of land. Comparing the family to local standards of living they were average. By American standards they would be considered poor. The Forgione family was a close one and hard-working. Orazio saw to it that his wife and children were always provided with the necessities of life. In order to do this, Mr. Forgione twice migrated to America to work leaving his family behind in Pietrelcina.

Generally, there is not a great deal for the children of a peasant family to look forward to. The eldest child usually inherits his father's business while the others marry at an early age and leave home to forage for themselves. This is as true today as it was when Padre Pio was a child. Today the youth of Pietrelcina look forward to the day when they can gather enough money together to travel to Milano or some other large northern city and obtain work in a factory or industrial plant. In the days of Padre Pio's youth, the priesthood offered an attractive future and it was in the direction that Orazio Forgione guided his son.

Religious background of Gargano

Gargano is rich in religious history. In the early days of the church, numerous saints travel through this region. Not far from San Giovanni Rotondo on the Adriatic coast perched high on the Monte Santé Angelo (Mount Saint Angel) is the famous basilica of Saint Michael the Archangel. The basilica was built over the grotto where the St. Michael appeared on several occasions. I visited the basilica one Sunday afternoon with Father Eric Erttilio Negrisola of the Capuchin monastery. Of interest in the shrine is a marble statue of Saint Michael's sculptured in 1507. Father Negrisola knew the gentleman in charge of

the altar and I could examine the altar close. A most unique feature of the statue is its three faces. Viewing it from the front it has the appearance of a young man. When observing the statue from the left and right profile two entirely different faces are seen. The church has a distinction of being the only church in the world where Mass is celebrated on an altar which has not been consecrated by man. The spot was consecrated by Saint Michael himself. The shrine became particularly popular during the days of the crusades, especially when the barbaric hordes threatened to overrun the world and destroy Christianity and civilization. St Michael is the patron saint of the soldiers and for this reason military leaders often made pilgrimages to the shrine to ask for his protection. It is interesting to note in relation to Padre Pio that his namesake, St Francis of Assisi, visited the shrine in while returning to Rome stopped at San Giovanni Rotondo. Before departing he announced that a great saint would rise from that City. Many believe Padre Pio is that saint.

Early life of Padre Pio

Saint Francis of Assisi has played an important role in Padre Pio's life. At the age of 5 he dedicated himself to St Francis. In 1902 he began his religious career by entering a Capuchin monastery. Here we begin a life of fasting and penance. During his studies he was sent to several monasteries. He seldom enjoyed good health and at times his illness caused great concern to his family. At times he would be plagued with severe fevers which would suddenly leave him as quickly and mysteriously as they had appeared. His family begged him to abstain from fasting, but young Francesco would not hear of it. At one time he went without food for 21 days. In 1910 Francesco Forgione was ordained a priest and became Padre Pio. Soon afterwards he was sent to assist the elderly parish priest at Pietrelcina. It was here that the first signs of Padre Pio's greatness appeared. During his long years of study for the priesthood, Padre Pio had devoted himself heart and soul to his work and now that he was the priest, he was free to exercise this devotion to the fullest degree. His deep love and understanding of the holy sacrifice of the Mass enabled him to perform this act to a height of perfection that was soon to become legendary. It was not enough for him to recite the prayers of the Mass, he paused and meditated on every phrase surrounding himself completely through the God whom he was serving. His Mass lasted 3 hours. It was not long before the length of Padre Pio's Mass began to upset the community. Not that the populace was ungrateful for this supreme sacrifice of their assistant pastor, but many found it impossible to attend Mass and to arrive at work at a reasonable hour. Some complained to the pastor Don Salvatore and he ordered Padre Pio to limit his Mass to 1 hour.

It was here in Pietrelcina that Padre Pio received the stigmata. The date of this blessed event was a 20th of September 1915 which is also the anniversary of the stigmata of Saint Francis of Assisi. Don Salvatore reports that Padre Pio informed him on this day that he had received the invisible stigmata. Don Salvatore in turn informed Rome. His pains were so severe that Don Salvatore suggested that he omit the celebration of Mass. To Padre Pio this was unthinkable. The physical pain he experienced through the stigmata was sweet compared to the mental anguish he would suffer and not being able to perform this lovely sacrifice of the Mass. Despite his pains Padre Pio continued to say his daily Mass.

He remained in Pietrelcina until Italy entered World War I and Padre Pio was drafted into the army. His military career was short-lived however as his poor health continued to deteriorate and when it was established that he had a severe case of tuberculosis (to no one's surprise) he was sent home to recover for 6 months after this. A second examination revealed that he was still gravely ill with tuberculosis and he was discharged from the service. On his return from the military, Padre Pio entered the Capuchin

monastery at San Giovanni Rotondo, and it was here in 1918, again on the 20th of September, that he received the visible stigmata. While kneeling in prayer before a crucifix in the choir, he suddenly felt a great pain, so great in fact that he uttered a sharp cry and collapsed. Some of us fellow monks heard the cry and rushed to the choir where they found Padre Pio semi-conscious on the floor before the crucifix. Blood was flowing from the wounds on his hands, feet and side. Padre Pio was carried to his tiny cell and thus began a new chapter in his life.

Now that I have touched slightly on the background of San Giovanni Rotondo in the early life of Padre Pio I shall return to my visit there.

On arriving at Padre Pio's tiny mountain hamlet, I turned to my notebook and looked up several addresses which had been given to me by Mr. Ennemond Boniface of Lyon France well-known author and journalist. I had become acquainted with Mr. Boniface in Konnersreuth Germany when I visited Theresa Newman in 1961. Mr. Boniface has authored several fine books on Theresa Neumann and is presently preparing for publication of a book on Padre Pio. Being familiar with San Giovanni Rotondo, Mr. Boniface had given me the names of several individuals whom he thought would be able to help me when I arrived. I want to immediately to see Mrs. Elsa Bertuetti at the Libreria Santa Maria Delle Grazie. She in turn introduced me to Father Joseph Chariens of Toulouse France. Father Chariens offered to share his room at the Villa Pia with me and I gratefully accepted as rooms are sometimes difficult to obtain in this little town. Father Chariens spoke fluent German which was also great help as I knew Little Italian.

After depositing my bags at the Villa Pia, I accompanied Father Chariens on a tour of the church and monastery. I then paid a visit to Miss Marie Powell who was a close friend of Padre Pio. An American, Miss Pyle has spent most of her life at San Giovanni Rotondo. She plays the organ at the church and participates in many religious functions. Miss Pyle was one of the first to recognize the greatness of Padre Pio and was instrumental in advancing his cause during his early life. Before hotels and restaurants were built at San Giovanni Rotondo, Miss Pyle opened her home to those who came to see the Padre. I delivered a message to Miss Pyle from Mr. Boniface and we sat for some time talking in a small room in her quaint home not far from the monastery. Before I left, I was taken into a second room where I was shown a lovely painting of Padre Pio as well as other photos and mementos of his life. Of interest was a large photo of Padre Pio's sister, a nun in a religious order in Rome.

After leaving Miss Pyle I returned to the hotel where Father Chariens briefed me on Padre Pio. As one might expect there are many stories connected with the Padre and I was grateful to have the help of Father Chariens in separating the fact from fiction.

Every afternoon Padre Pio celebrates benediction and I was pleased when Father Chariens asked me to accompany him to the service. Hundreds of people attend all of Padre Pio services and a visitor not being familiar with the routine is likely to be lost in the shuffle. After benediction Padre Pio receives visitors, men only, in the sacristy of the church and it was here that I met Padre Pio for the first time. I was standing not far from the altar rail during benediction and was able to observe him closely. I first looked for the wounds in his hands and noticed that they were covered with a pair of fingerless gloves. Father Chariens explained that the wounds often bleed and are extremely painful to the slightest touch, therefore the Padre wears mitts to absorb the blood and protect the wounds. Only while celebrating Mass does he remove the mitts. Because of his age, 76, and tremendous pain that he suffers, at least one priest is always present to assist him when he kneels, etc. The wounds on his feet

cause him to walk with some difficulty and I noticed that each step seemed to cause him great discomfort. After benediction I waited by the door which leads to the sacristy and presently it was opened by one of the monks and we were ushered into his presence. The path followed by Padre Pio as he leaves the sacristy is a short one and visitors try to place themselves strategically along this path in hopes of speaking to him. Thanks to Father Chariens, I was able to secure a spot close to where he sat. I knelt in silence with the other men while Padre Pio completed his prayers.

Padre Pio sat at his dressing table his hands clasped over his head, his lips move constantly in prayer and occasionally he would stretch his hands in front of him and return them to his head. After about 15 minutes he rose and offered his blessing to all present. He then began his short walk past the rows of kneeling men to the door which led to the monastery. Now and then he would stop to speak with one of the men or to accept a gift. Occasionally he would allow someone to kiss his mitt covered hand. I did not speak to him on this occasion being grateful only to be in his presence. When the Padre had passed Father Chariens tapped me on the shoulder and motioned me to follow him into the adjoining room which was less crowded. When Padre Pio approached, I knelt before him and kissed the mitt which covered the bleeding hand. Father Chariens asked the Padre a question and the answer must have been a comic one as everyone present laughed. Not knowing Italian, I could not understand what was said.

After leaving the monastery I went to a small clearing to the south of the monastery. There facing Padre Pio's cell window, outside the garden wall, pilgrims had gathered to pray in to sing goodnight to Padre Pio. Several songs for this purpose have been composed by Professor G. Curci. I attended the ceremony every night and found it most beautiful tribute to the stigmatized priest. The praying, singing voices of the assembled men, women and children rise into the night and is carried off down the rocky slopes by the evening breeze. The white stucco of the monastery walls set off against the huge black mountain which looms up behind it make the scene quite unforgettable. As dusk falls with the setting of the sun, the bell in the monastery rings throughout the hills and all eyes are fixed on one small window in the monastery wall which is cell number five. Here the crowd knows Padre Pio will soon appear. You can tell without looking when the light is turned on in the cell. A murmur of excitement runs through the crowd. Voices quicken and everyone thumbs through the small pamphlet to a song entitled "Buona Notte a Padre Pio" (goodnight Padre Pio). Soon he is there at the window waving a white cloth. The crowd replies by waving their handkerchiefs in recognition. Padre Pio returns to his prayers and when he is finished, he comes back to the open window for a final good night. Most of the crowd then disperses but some remain praying far into the night.

Padre Pio's Day

I was amazed to find how closely the entire community revolves around Padre Pio. Everyone plans their day according to Padre's schedule. Even the buses that bring hundreds of visitors daily to San Giovanni Rotondo operate at Padre Pio's convenience. Where else do you find buses making special trips of 20 miles at 3 in the morning. Following is a breakdown of Padre Pio's daily schedule:

5 a. m. Mass at the large Church

6:30 am finished Mass and returns to his cell

7 a. m. begins confession of women

8:45 a. m. replies to letters in his study
11:00 a. m. prays at the large Church
12:00 noon prayers and blessing in small chapel
12 to 12:45 lunch
1 to 2:30 rest and prayer
2:30 to 3:30 confesses men
3:30 to 4:30 answers correspondence in his studio
4:30 to 5:00 Leads rosary in large Church
5 to 5:30 officiates at benediction
5:30 to 7 prayer and answers correspondence
7 to 7:30 prayer and greets crowd at his cell window
7:30 retires for the night

Considering his age and health one must admit that the schedule is a strenuous one to fulfill. The church doors are closed at midnight and are not open before 4:30 in the morning. One of the monks explain that if the church remained open the entire night people would remain in the church all night sleeping in the benches in order to ensure that they had a choice seat in the morning. Long before the doors are open the crowds begin to arrive. One morning I found several hundred gathered at the doors at 3. As the people wait to be admitted they sing and pray. People from all walks of life flock to Padre Pio. The President of Italy recently called on him and he frequently greets Cardinals, bishops and other Church dignitaries. Most of his visitors however are the peasants, housewives, working men, and gypsies. The lame, the sick, the poor, the depressed, the blind all find comfort and spiritual blessing by being close to this holy man and taking part in his day of prayer and sacrifice. Most of them come by bus but the steady stream of traffic that flows to and from the Capuchin monastery includes everything from Rolls-Royces to donkey carts. Many make the pilgrimage on foot and some arrive on crutches.

I had planned to spend only 2 days at San Giovanni Rotondo but fortunately I changed my mind otherwise I would have missed the true greatness of Padre Pio. It is unfortunately true that many of the people who come here do so because of Padre Pio's stigmata. They are curious. They want to see this man who bleeds like Christ. After remaining here a few days and closely observing Padre Pio and those around him it became apparent to me that the miracle of Padre Pio was not his stigmata. The stigmata are a wonder, yes, and it is through the stigmata that Padre Pio has achieved his greatness. The greatness of Padre Pio is the man himself. Why do these people flock in great numbers to Padre Pio? Let us look at his Mass.

Padre Pio's Mass

During my 7-Day stay at San Giovanni Rotondo, I attended 6 Masses celebrated by Padre Pio. Every day when he celebrated Mass, which is at 5 in the morning the church is filled. I asked myself why? The texts of the Mass that Padre Pio celebrates is no different than the Masses celebrated by thousands of priests daily throughout the world. The prayers, the sacrifice, the ceremonies are the same. Surely, I thought these people don't inconvenience themselves or go hundreds of miles out of their way simply to attend a Mass at 5 in the morning when they could attend the same Mass service at a more practical hour in their own local parish Church. Some must travel all night to be there in time for this Mass. They didn't come here at this hour of the day just to see him. They could see him at almost any hour of the day as he is always in the church or monastery. He hasn't left the monastery since he entered it in 1916. I thought the myself there must be something different about Padre Pio's Mass? I soon discovered that there was a difference. The difference was in the way Padre Pio offered his Mass

Padre Pio is so dramatical in his celebration of the holy Mass that one cannot help but become part of it. By dramatical I mean spiritually as well as theatrically. I don't want to create the false impression that Padre Pio is simply a good actor. One must realize at through his stigmata Padre Pio is a living representation of the crucified Christ during the Mass he surrenders himself completely to his work stopping for periods of deep meditation before the consecration, the elevation, and the communion. To Padre Pio, the altar is a stage and which the priest is an actor making a command performance before Christ himself in obedience to Christ instruction at the last supper when he said, "as often as you do these things, in memory of me shall you do them."

Before the start of the Mass he stops for a long period of meditation as if he were spiritually conditioning himself in the realization of the mystical wonder in which he is about to participate. The various "acts" of the Mass are executed in a grand show of love and devotion. At times his body is bent in pain and his shoulders sag as if under the weight of the Cross. His facial expressions changed from that of offer awesome wonder to sheer agony. At times he weeps openly so that his voice is blurred and choked with sobs of sadness. At such occasions Padre Pio withdraws from the folds of his vestments a white cloth to wipe away the tears or to remove the blood from his bleeding hands. This was particularly noticeable on the 20th of September which was the 45th anniversary of his stigmata. On this day which was one of an unusual suffering for Padre Pio he extends his hands towards me after the Mass as my lips touch the wool mitts covering his wounds, I noticed that they were damp with blood and that a large area of the mitt was stained. Although my lips touch the mitt very lightly, I felt him wince with pain. The wounds are extremely sensitive, and he suffers excruciating pain.

To a priest the most important part of the day is his Mass. For that matter the greatest privilege enjoyed by any priest is his right to celebrate Mass. This is doubly true of Padre Pio. not only because of the great love he has for his work but also because of the close relationship he enjoys with God through the stigmata. This is the greatness of Padre Pio and therefore he's able to perform the holy sacrifice of the Mass to such a high degree of perfection. One cannot be present at his Mass without feeling that he is living part of it. Therefore, people trudged over the long winding road to San Giovanni Rotondo during the wee hours of the morning to attend his Mass. They are drawn to Padre Pio because of his great love for God, and through his Mass, which in a way is a public display of this love they can satisfy their own desire to be closer to God. Padre Pio carries the memory of his sacrifice with him to the sacristy following the Mass. This is clearly visible as he prostrates himself in prayer on the dressing counter before receiving his visitors.

Padre Pio in the Confessional

There are several instances in the Mass when a priest offers up prayers for the salvation of souls. The actual salvation of these souls is accomplished through the confessional. It is here as the confessor that Padre Pio excels. The confessional is a challenge to any priest for it is here that the soul is made acceptable for receiving Christ in holy Communion. Padre Pio established himself as a great confessor long before he gained fame as a stigmatist. The Padre considers this the most important part of his work. The role of the priest in the confessional is much like that of a doctor. Here the priest skillfully extracts from his "patient" the sources and causes of his "illnesses" and brings relief to the sick and suffering souls. The fact that Padre Pio is an accomplished confessor is reflected by the hordes who come daily to be confessed by him. So great are the numbers that the brothers at the monastery have had to set up a ticket system for confession. The waiting list to Padre Pio's confessional is as long as that of a Broadway hit. The waiting period for women is about 1 month with about 1 week for men. I am sorry that I was unable to be confessed by Padre Pio as he does not confess in English, but I was able to speak to many who had confessed. One lady related to me that after she had finished her confession Padre Pio had reminded her that she omitted something. She searched her memory until she was satisfied there was nothing remaining to be confessed. Padre Pio then asked her if she had failed to attend Mass on one Sunday. The woman stated that she had indeed failed to attend Mass on that Sunday. Several similar instances were also related to me by others who had been confessed by Padre Pio. This does not mean that Padre Pio is a mind-reader or that he works miracles in the confessional. It is simply proof of his skillfulness as a confessor. In the confessional, Padre Pio wages a "save the soul campaign". He believes in the theory that if he can get his people to the confessional, he can also get them to church. Because of his experience in the confessional he can tell immediately whether an individual is properly prepared. If not, he or she is quickly excused for a re-examination of their conscience. Before entering the confessional, you are warned that Padre Pio is there for a confession and confession only. Those who wish to use the confessional as a means of having a personal chat with the padre are given a hasty exit.

Padre Pio the Man

Those who spend a few days at San Giovanni Rotondo following Padre Pio through his daily routine soon discover, as I did, that he is a down-to-earth man. At times he displays a sharp wit with a deep sense of humor. He was born a peasant and although he has long since been removed from that atmosphere, he has retained these inherited qualities which are symbolic of the peasants and farmers of this region. To say that he is unpredictable would be a gross understatement. His fellow Capuchins who assist him have long since given up trying to anticipate his next move.

I was rather shocked one morning when attending Padre Pio's Mass to hear him order a group of women to be quiet. Not that I blame him. The women sometimes become overly enthusiastic on seeing him and create a disturbance. It's just that it sounded out of place.

He has a tremendous love for children and the elderly. I saw him display this affection on several occasions. As I have stated before, after Mass and benediction, the men can enter the sacristy and visit with the Padre after he concludes his prayers. We are warned not to disturb him in any way while he is praying. I saw several men soundly rebuked by the Padre when they interrupted his meditation. One morning I saw a young boy walk up to the Padre as he knelt in prayer and attempt to give him an envelope. The Padre, deep in thought, failed to see the youngster so the young boy reached up and

tugged at the sleeve of his robe. I was standing close to Padre Pio so I reached over and drew the boy to me so that he wouldn't further provoke the Padre. Padre Pio however, waved me aside and called the boy to him. Accepting the envelope, the smiling priest inquired as to what the boy wanted. The boy answered that the envelope contained a few religious pictures that he wanted blessed. Padre Pio then remove the articles from the envelope, blessed them, returned them to the beaming youngster and sent him on his way.

Many people bring their children to be blessed by Padre Pio and he usually goes out of his way to do so. Although he gives a general blessing to everyone present, he is in the habit of blessings small children individually. One morning as Padre Pio was leaving the sacristy, he heard a small baby cry out at the far end of the room. There were many people present and Padre Pio had obviously missed him in the crowd. Returning to the room, Padre Pio blessed the child, much to the delight of the father, and then left. This may seem like a small favor but knowing the extreme pain Padre Pio suffers with every step he takes on his wounded feet, one can appreciate the true value of this sacrifice. The baby was a dirty, ragged little fellow wearing a long multicolored dress. He belonged to a group of gypsies. I learned from the child's father that the entire family had made the pilgrimage from France because of the child's illness.

Another such event took place in the monastery one Thursday morning. Men are admitted to the monastery while Padre Pio is on route to a cell and wishing to have some religious articles blessed, I had entered early and station myself strategically at the foot of the stairs where the Padre would descend after leaving the choir. Shortly before Padre Pio made his appearance, many men were admitted. Being narrow, the corridor doorway was soon blocked, making it impossible for others to enter. As Padre Pio was approaching, I noticed a man in the doorway holding a baby over the heads of the crowd hoping that the Padre would notice him. Having an advantage in height over the predominantly short Italians I reached over the crowd took the baby from his father and held him out to Padre Pio to be blessed. Padre Pio had noticed the transaction and had stopped and waited until the exchange was completed. He was smiling happily and seemed very jolly, he was obviously in a good mood as he uttered a loud chuckle, padded the boy on the head, blessed him and continued on his way. The happy parents were waiting for me at the convent door when I left the church and stopped to thank me. They explained that the baby (Francesco Silveri) had been named for the Padre Pio and they had made a long journey to have him blessed by his namesake. They had to return home that day and had he not been blessed they would have been very disappointed.

The elderly is also favored by Padre Pio. On the morning of the 45th anniversary of his stigmata, I saw him bypass several distinguished-looking gentlemen and ignored the large sprays of flowers they had bought to commemorate the occasion while he stopped to chat with a little old man dressed in peasant clothing. I became acquainted with the elderly lady who attended every religious function that Padre Pio participated in. She always sat at the same spot at the right of the altar. There Padre Pio would be certain to see her as he had to pass close by at the finish of the service. At such occasions her face would reflect indescribable joy. Almost daily when returning to his cell, Padre Pio stopped to accept a pinch of snuff from an elderly man who stationed himself along his route.

This article on Padre Pio would not be complete without mention of the miracles which are attributed to him. Like stigmatism, this subject should also be treated with caution. When it comes to miracles people

often tend to be quite emotional and often shout miracle without giving the matter much thought. If all reported miracles of Padre Pio were assembled, they would certainly fill a good-sized volume. Before a miracle is accepted by the church it undergoes extensive investigation. This sometimes takes many years. Without a doubt most of these reported miracles would fail to survive these rigid tests. There are, however, reported miracles that defy both natural and scientific law. When this condition exists, one cannot help but question the possibility of their divine origin. Because of the interest in the subject I shall touch lightly on a few of these reported wonders.

The case of Gemma di Giordi is of interest. Gemma was totally blind from birth. In fact, she had been born without pupils. A score of doctors and eye specialist who examined her all agree that Gemma would never see. Gemma's grandmother who had great faith in Padre Pio suggested that she be taken there for a visit. Thus, at the age of six, Gemma was taken to San Giovanni Rotondo by her grandmother. Little Gemma's visit was also the occasion of her first communion which she received from Padre Pio. After the communion Padre Pio called her to him and blessed her. Immediately after this blessing Gemma exclaimed that she could see. She could indeed see, and it was fitting that the first sight which greeted her eyes was that a Padre Pio standing before her. A re-examination by doctors not only confirmed the fact that she could see but disclosed that she could see perfectly without pupils a fact which according to the eye specialist is a medical impossibility. Doctors throughout Europe are still marveling over this unexplainable phenomenon. With the display of such divine power it is no wonder that San Giovanni Rotondo should be the object of thousands of pilgrims.

The Odor of Sanctity

It is said that when a person obtains the state of Holiness, he receives a pleasant odor or odor of sanctity. Much has been written about the odor of sanctity. It must be pointed out that although several saints have been associated with the odor of sanctity many others have not experienced an odor of any kind. Although such an odor may be associated with the saintliness it is certainly not conclusive evidence of a person's sanctity. There is however undisputed evidence that an odor of sanctity does exist in relation to Padre Pio. A noted physician who has examined Padre Pio relates that a piece of cloth taken from the wound in Padre Pio side gave off a very distinct odor. So pronounced was this odour that several persons in the same room as this piece of cloth made mention of it although none were aware of the doctor's association with Padre Pio or that there was such a cloth in the room. The good doctor makes no attempt to identify this odor except to say that it was like a "strange perfume".

The first time I experienced the odor was on my second day at San Giovanni Rotondo. The location was the sacristy of the church following Padre Pio's five a.m. Mass. Padre Pio held his hand out for me to kiss as he passed and as my lips touch the mitt-covered wound on his hand, I became aware of a very pleasant odor. This odor remained with me for quite some time. I asked Father Chariens about the odor and it was he who first enlightened me about the odor of sanctity. I decided that I would try again to kiss the Padres hand and attempt to identify the odor. The occasion presented itself on the following day in the sacristy following benediction. Again, as the good Padre painfully shuffled by me on wounded feet I've bent forward and planted a light kiss on his hand. I must have lingered too long in this position as I became aware of Padre Pio pulling his hand away. As before I immediately recognized the very distinct, pleasant odor. Try as I may I could not compare the scent with any smell or odor that I have ever experienced. Some people describe the odor as resembling that of roses or perfume and even violets. I

cannot agree with them. I have a keen sense of smell and I am familiar with both roses and violets, but I am unable to associate that odor with any flower I have ever sniffed.

On at least three other occasions, I witnessed the odor. These occasions took place on three consecutive mornings following Padre Pio's 5:00 o'clock Mass. As Padre Pio goes from the sacristy to the section of the monastery in which his cell is located, he must climb a long flight of stairs. Several of these steps lead to a landing within the sacristy. A door is located on this landing and no one is allowed beyond this point except authorized personnel such as a priest, etc. These steps are sought after by the first men who enter the sacristy as they are elevated and offer of splendid view of all of Padre Pio's actions. Also, there is space for three men to kneel on the right of these steps and the shoulders of these men form a living banister for Padre Pio. As the Padre ascends the steps, he places his hand on each shoulder for support. In this position the men whose shoulder is being used need only to turn his hands slightly to clearly see the stigmatized hand or just sniff the odor of sanctity. Padre Pio three times used my shoulder to support his weight as he climbed those stairs and on all three occasions, I was aware of the odor of sanctity but again I was not able to identify it. I can say no more than that the odor exists. Its identity will have to be defined by someone whose proboscis is keener than my own.

Bilocation

Padre Pio also has the gift of bilocation. That is to be capable of being present in two or more places at the same time. Fantastic as it may sound there are several undisputable instances where Padre Pio appeared to individuals hundreds and even thousands of miles from the Capuchin monastery where he was also present. It is significant to note that Padre Pio has himself confirmed the fact that he has experienced this strange phenomenon. Such a distinguished person as the secretary to Pius Pope Pius XII was the object of such a visit. He reports meeting and speaking to Padre Pio in Rome only to discover later that the Padre had been in the monastery of San Giovanni Rotondo at the same hour. Many soldiers have identified Padre Pio as the monk who saved lives or aided them during times of extreme danger during the last world war. Some of these grateful soldiers have journeyed to San Giovanni Rotondo to thank Padre Pio and he has not only confirmed their stories but gave detailed descriptions of the episodes that could have been given only by a person connected directly with the event.

The city of San Giovanni Rotondo itself is a miracle of Padre Pio. Many of its inhabitants have drifted dangerously away from church and Padre Pio was instrumental in returning them to God. He is also credited with saving the town from destruction during the war. This section of southern Italy suffered greatly during world war II. The nearby city of Foggia as well as other nearby towns and cities were the object of frequent bombings. During these troubled times Padre Pio told the inhabitants of San Giovanni that their town would not be bombed. The American air Force however, had already decided the fate of San Giovanni Rotondo. The American pilot who was sent to bomb San Giovanni Rotondo relates that he was about to drop his load of bombs on the town, he saw a monk in the clouds in front of his plane. Because of this he decided to spare the town and dropped his bombs elsewhere. The pilot has never seen or heard of Padre Pio but later he quickly identified Padre Pio as the monk he had seen in the sky on that fateful day.

The Casa Sollievo Della Sofferenza

Another of Padre Pio's miracles stands not far from the monastery. This is the Casa Sollievo Della Sofferenza (House for the relief of the suffering) a beautiful modern hospital which is the best equipped one in Europe. Hospitals and doctors are rare and South Italy and up to time that the hospital was built many people here died without the benefit of seeing a doctor. The sick was forced to suffer from simple injuries and diseases that are usually cured by a common medication. A less ambitious person would have abandoned all thought of building a hospital on an isolated mountain top miles from a sizable town or city. Padre Pio was determined to realize his dream and relieve the suffering of his people. There were no funds available, so Padre Pio started the drive by donating a single gold coin which have been given him as an offering to charity. Soon after, other contributions were received, and ground was broken for the construction of the hospital. The work was interrupted by world war II and commenced again after hostilities had ceased. Most of the building costs were supplied by an English woman and by American Italian emigrants in memory of former New York city mayor Fiorello La Guardia. Today the hospital stands as a symbol of Padre Pio's love for his people and of his untiring efforts to ease their suffering. Padre Pio is not one to leave a job half finished. Near the new hospital stands the Church of Santa Maria Delle Grazie where those suffering from spiritual illness may also find comfort.

San Giovanni Rotondo also has also benefited socially and economically through Padre Pio. A few years ago, visitors to the Capuchin monastery would have found a two-mile stretch of barren wasteland from the monastery to San Giovanni Rotondo. Today modern hotels, restaurants, homes and other businesses are thriving there. To accommodate the ever-growing flow of tourists, new roads and gasoline stations have been built. The standard of living in the community has more than tripled.

What impressed me the most about Padre Pio? I was asked that question so many times since returning that that I shall write a few words on the subject for the benefit of the reader. All things considered, I must say that I was most impressed by Padre Pio's tremendous faith in prayer. When he wanted to build his hospital, he had only one gold coin to do it with, so he turned to prayer and eventually these prayers were answered. Indeed, everything which is great about Padre Pio, all his miracles, small and large have been accomplished through prayer. One often hears about the power of prayer and in Padre Pio you have the rare opportunity to see this power at work. He has the remarkable ability of reaching his people through prayer. To quote Miss Pyle, "his prayers are like capillary veins", just as capillary veins carry life giving blood to the body, so Padre Pio's prayer bring life to the soul by nourishing it with the grace of prayer. I returned from my visit with Padre Pio with the feeling that I had witnessed a living instrument of God at work.