

to which he is invited then so much longer are the trials and sufferings. With Padre Pio this painful period appears to have lasted several years after his ordination.

In the *Night of the Spirit* it is God Himself who assails the soul to renew it in the image and likeness of His Son; He permits all manner of evils to befall the mystic so that the man feels himself completely abandoned, cast off from God, victim of the devil, and subject to every kind of temptation and bitterness... The Lord in His Infinite love wishes to give Himself, but first the tabernacle where he would dwell in so sublime a manner must be made holy...

His ordeal over, the mystic now realizes how necessary was this preparation, for no one would dare to live in the divine Presence without first passing through the crucible of tribulation. The Lord Himself, in His eager desire to further enrich the soul, is the sculptor who carves and chisels, refining his masterpiece from the crude block of human nature. When the mystic finally emerges into the clear light once more he knows for certain that all was the work of God; he knows, too, that even as God had seemed to reject him He was in fact present all the time in the depths of the soul preparing it for yet higher gifts.

With the cessation of these trials would it be too fanciful to believe that the highest state of the mystic in this life, the spousal union or mystical marriage as it is commonly called, was consummated between the Lord and Padre Pio on that day in 1918 when the wounds of Christ became incarnate in the flesh of the first priest ever chosen for this privilege?

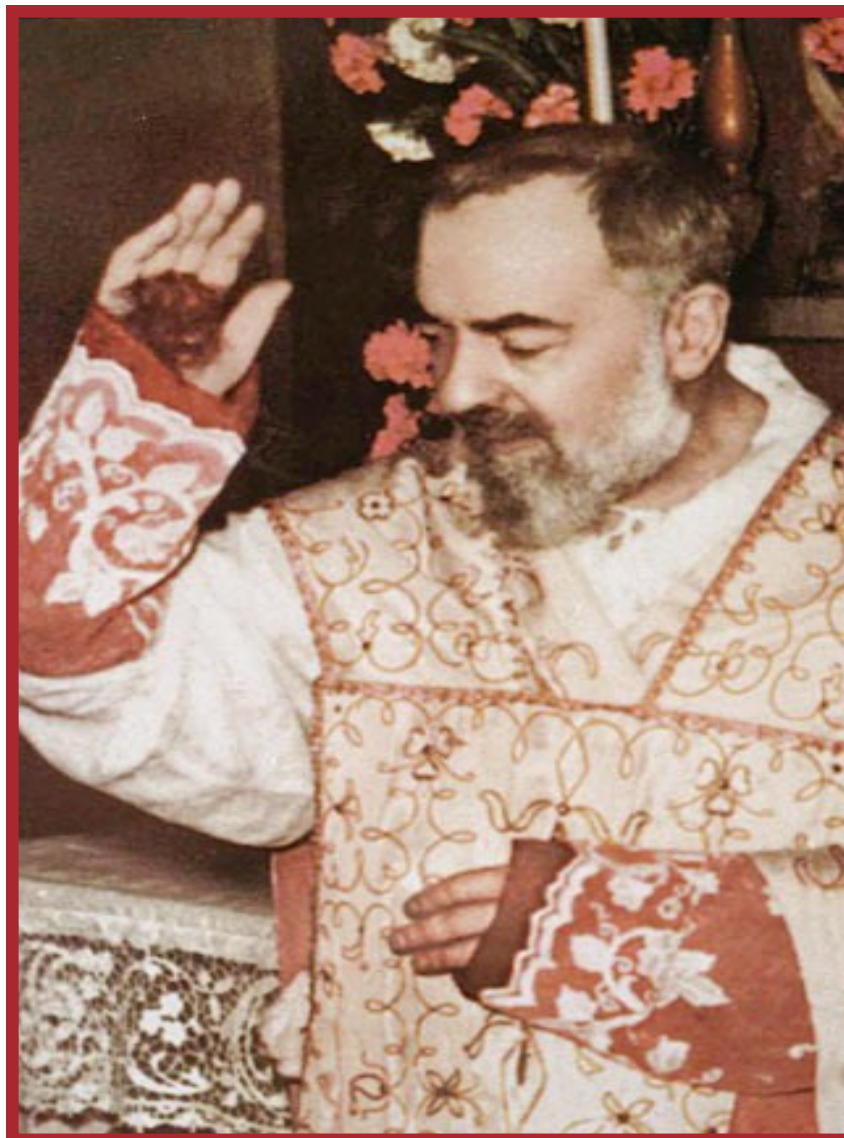
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Padre Pio *and* **His Spiritual Journey**



Padre Pio and His Spiritual Journey

***From his earliest years, Francesco Forgione (Padre Pio), was a man of prayer. Considered a quiet boy by the other youngsters, he would seldom play with them "because they blaspheme." This aversion to sin would cause him to run away to pray in the church of Saint Pius V. At other times, he would sit under a tree on his father's property and "think about God." By age five Francesco had already determined to become a Franciscan Capuchin, in part because of the habit and the beard, which he liked greatly, but also moved by the grace of God to seek perfection.**

His climb of the ladder of holiness, however, involved more than pious aspirations and flight from bad example of the world. Even very young it encompassed to a remarkable degree the battle against the flesh and against the devil. For example, the child Francis was no stranger to mortification. Although the family had meager rations as it was, Francesco nonetheless occasionally deprived himself of food. At the age of nine, his mother discovered him sleeping on the floor with a rock for a pillow, a practice which apparently had been going on for some time. Such austerity would become a hallmark of his entire life. He also experienced the assaults of the devil, who appeared in horrible forms in his dreams. Later in life these attacks would be in a more direct form, even physical assaults.

Yet, God did not leave him abandoned, providing him with consoling visions of the Blessed Mother and his Guardian Angel. On one occasion the scope of his future warfare with evil was made known to him. In a vision that was granted him after receiving Communion one day, he saw himself in the middle of a large hall between two groups of people, one group had beautiful faces, the other hideous ones. Just then a huge monster came from the end of the hall toward him, but Jesus appeared, in order to give him strength. Before the monster could reach Francesco it was struck by lightning and disappeared. The Lord said to him: "That is the fiend against whom you will have to fight." Any biography of Padre Pio's life shows the extent to which this prophetic vision came true, even in its literal sense.

The Spiritual life of Padre Pio divides itself somewhat artificially into three periods of development although no great demarcation separates one from the other. Saint Bonaventure's spiritual classic -- *On the Threefold Way* -- describes these three stages of the soul from the purgative through the illuminative way to the unitive way, culminating in the state of ecstasy. All three periods are found in the spiritual development of Padre Pio. Words are inadequate to describe the fires of purification into which he is plunged during the purgative period.

The purgative period of Padre Pio's life may tentatively be assigned to the outset of his religious life when he received the novice's habit in 1903. This is a testing time during which the religious community determines the fitness and aptitude of the novice while he makes serious trial of the life to which he believes himself called. On another level the purgative way of Padre Pio calls forth to the utmost the generosity of the novice and in the case of the saints it is not uncommon during this time for such generosity to exceed the bounds of moderation. It is the time of detachment from all sin, a breaking with creatures to live *for God alone*. Practices such as fasting, vigils, solitude and various other mortifications played an important part in Padre Pio's spiritual development at this time, strengthening him in virtue and liberating his spirit from all selfishness. The Franciscan ideal makes severe demands upon Padre Pio who would attain to union with God: natural desires, even their first movements must be suppressed... This purgation took many forms, including severe health issues, living on the Eucharist alone for twenty-one days and other severe austerities. It is interesting to observe that in later years he never departed from these severe practices. It was on one such occasion that Padre Pio after his ordination first received the invisible stigmata.

Besides illness and physical sufferings, other trials of far greater torment must be undergone by the mystic. As St John of the Cross has vividly described, these are under the image of "night." After the senses have been purified the mystic now enters upon the most difficult of all trials-- *the Night of the Spirit*. There is no telling how long this lasts but spiritual authors agree that the greater the mission of the person concerned and the higher the union and contemplation