

role, being to Giovina her discreet counselor and sensitive intimate friend, and always worrying about her poor health and state of soul. Raffaelina's spiritual progress under Padre Pio's guidance, was full of difficulties, doubts, and faltering as well as great misunderstandings, and the Padre would not hesitate to tell her that she was "still a rather capricious daughter and someone unmanageable," and in his letters often told her off severely: "Now, you complain that you went some distance away from your native town to enjoy a little peace and that you didn't find this even outside the four walls of the convent. I sympathize with you, because you are not fully aware of what you are saying. If you mean peace according to your own imagination as worldlings understand it, then you are right. You left Foggia in search of an improvement in your beloved sister's health and unfortunately you did not find it according to your own taste and your own very foolish judgment. The Christian soul looks very differently at God's providence for His creatures."

Raffaelina though, was determined in her search for Christian perfection. She desired with all her heart to "belonged wholly to Jesus," and following the Padre's advice she gave up her modern worldly novels and dedicated her time instead to reading books on the saints. "Help yourself mainly doing this period by reading holy books," the Padre advised during the summer of 1914, when writing to her. "I earnestly desire to see you reading such books at all times, for this reading provides excellent food for the soul and conduces to great progress along the path of perfection, by no means inferior to what we obtain through prayer and holy meditation. In prayer and meditation it is we ourselves who speak to the Lord, while in holy reading it is God who speaks to us."

When on 17 February 1916, Padre Pio came to live in Foggia at the St. Anne friary, the cancer that had been found in Raffaelina, the summer before, had worsened considerably and Padre Pio on 27 February wrote to father Agostino: "the poor invalid is in a very bad way, pray and get others to pray for this poor patient." Padre Pio assisted and visited her every day in her home until her last day in this world, 25 March 1916. The same day, her young spiritual director wrote a letter the Father Agostino telling him the news: "Let us exult in the Lord with tears! This morning at 4 o'clock we gain another intercessor at the throne of the Most High. Raffaelina has finished the course, she has celebrated the nuptials with her divine Spouse. She fell asleep in the Lord with a smile of contempt for this world. Lucky soul! I leave you to imagine what is going on within me. For the past 16 days, since the Lord was pleased to manifest to me and to herself what was to happen this morning. I had been preparing myself for this divine will. I envy her choice and may it please God through the intercession of this elect soul to grant also to me the repose of the just. I am weary of life, dear Father; I detest this world as much as a soul belonging to Jesus can detest sin."

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# Padre Pio and Raffaelina Cerase

by Marianna lafelice

Lellina Cerase was born in Foggia, the capital of the Capitanata region in the autumn of 1868 during the office of the very popular conservative mayor Lorenzo Scillitani. Lellina, which is the diminutive for Raffaelina, was born into a family of southern Italian nobility, typical of her time. Her father Michele, active in local politics, was listed as a landowner in the city's administrative council of 1875.

Up to the age of seven, Lellina was entrusted to an aunt, a nun in a Carmelite monastery that ran a school in the nearby town of Lucera. Here she received her first schooling. Then from the age of 7 to 21 she lived, as she would later tell Padre Pio, in "the world!...blind and deaf and wicked" neglecting her spiritual life, "extremely fond of profane books and novels." In short, out to enjoy life as a woman of her social position could in those times.

However, the little world of Raffaelina's family, like all families, comparing it with the alteration of the seasons, had its good as well as its difficult times.

Difficulties between Raffaelina and her brother Matteo began as soon as her elderly and saintly father, who had always taken care of his children, died at the age of 84. The loss of the most important family member who kept the family together, and the children's inability to come to an agreement over the inheritance was, as so often happens in any age, the cause of the family's breakdown. Squabbles and divisions began in the family that would affect Raffaelina and her sister Giovina deeply. In fact, because of these disagreements the two sisters were forced to leave the family home and to rent a house, which for Raffaelina was a great suffering, because in the eyes of society this was considered to be a disgrace, but even more so because it meant that she was cut off from all those family ties that were for a single woman, at the beginning of the last century, so important. It was in the middle of this family discord that Raffaelina began, thanks to Father Agostino of San Marco in Lamis, her correspondence with Padre Pio, who was living then in Pietrelcina. In fact, Father Agostino had already recommended the Cerase sisters, without naming them, to the holy friar's prayers in June 1913.

Raffaelina would immediately take advantage of this opening given to her by Father Agostino and on 24 March, she sent her first letter to Padre Pio, and so becoming the Capuchin friar's **first spiritual child**. In these letters that today make up the second volume of Padre Pio's Letters, Raffaelina gives us an insight, almost in diary form, of a woman's conversion. Her writings are inspiring and in fact give one a wonderful and comprehensive glimpse into her spiritual life. Raffaelina was able to transfer to Padre Pio, all her fragility as an unmarried woman living alone, in a time when a woman living alone was something still unacceptable and meant almost a rejection from society.

What the essayist Richard Steele wrote in the 18th century that "a woman is a daughter, a sister, a wife and a mother, a mere appendage of the human race," was still true in southern Italian society in Raffaelina's time.

For Raffaelina the loss of her father had transformed the Cerase home into an empty shell and deprived of the protective walls of her home she suffered greatly. It was because of this that her relationship with her brother Matteo, with whom she had never felt very close, came to an end. Raffaelina was never able, as the normal custom of the time, to accept her brother as the new head of the family. She was never able to see him as a protective figure, something she would find from now on only in Padre Pio's capable and charitable spiritual direction.

Raffaelina in her letters would frequently feel the need, almost physically, to describe her difficult relationship with her family and her nostalgia for a reality that had once existed and wished perhaps in some way to hang on to.

She confided to Padre Pio all her personal inner weaknesses: "I do not know how to pray, I do not know how to recollect myself, I like completely the gift of meditation, of the presence of God," and discovered in him that guide that she had been unable to find.

And Padre Pio, even though very young and sick, was extremely kind to Raffaelina, **familiarizing himself with the personal characteristics and circumstances of her soul, a trait, as it has been pointed out before, of his spiritual direction**, and presenting to Raffaelina in his letters, the quest for Christian perfection as perhaps the most difficult but nevertheless the most lofty of all goals. And he urged her almost at once to search for Jesus through Our Lady and encouraged her continuously to imitate and follow Mary's example.

Padre Pio, even though he had no previous experience in spiritual direction, knew Raffaelina needed guidance and that he gave her, and also a lot more. In my opinion (Matianna), he deliberately directed Raffaelina to the Mother of God, and held her up to her as an exemplary model for her to follow because she was a woman who was both strong and gentle, but above all a woman who, with the loss of her Son (Jesus), had experienced the greatest loss and suffering possible to a woman, and who had transformed this into life in the most definite and perfect way possible.

The spiritual trials, material hardships, and also illnesses that she experienced later on in her life would become for Raffaelina an agony of love, and it would be her older sister Giovina, the only family member who would remain close to her, who would look after her like a "second mother." Spiritually however, it was Raffaelina who took on the protective