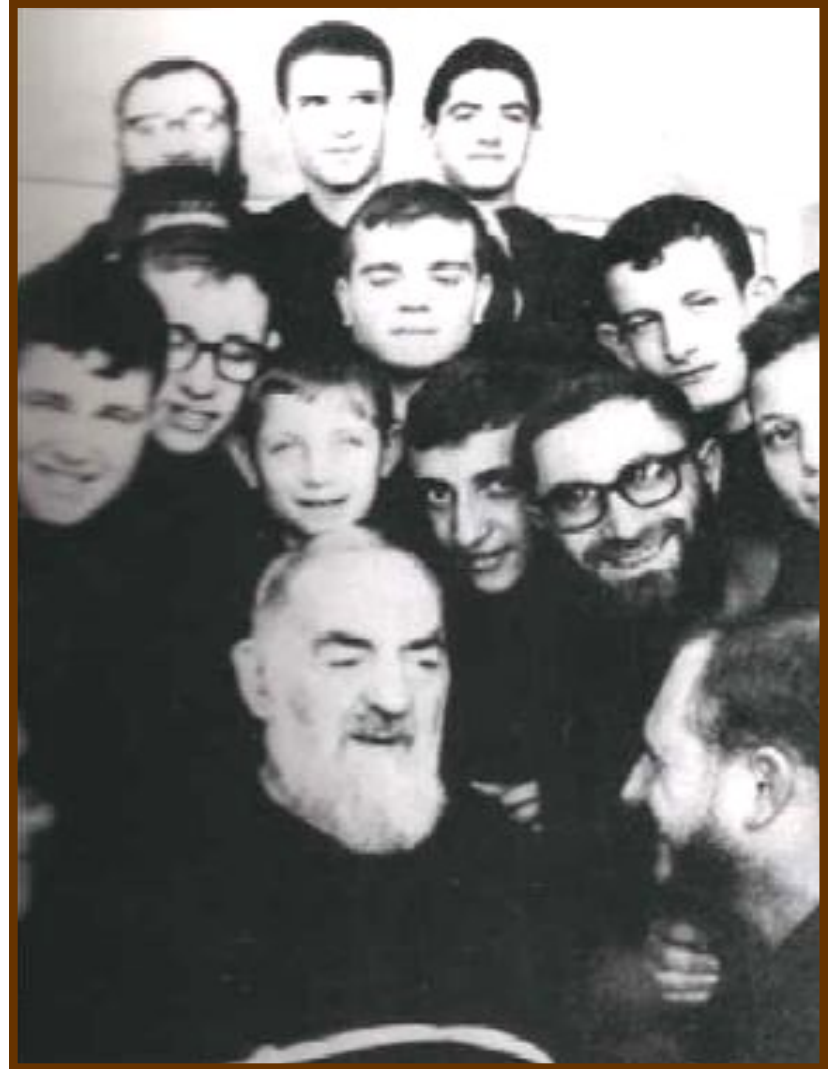




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**Padre Pio –
Between the Student Friars and the Military**



**Padre Pio with some of the students
of the Seraphic College**

Padre Pio – Between the Student Friars and the Military

by Stefano Campanella

Padre Pio awaited at Giovanni Rotondo the Father Provincial's visit to know his decision as to which friary he was to live in. Father Benedetto was expected at the end of September, but he arrived in mid-October. The first thing he asked his disciple was: "How are you feeling?" "Quite well," was the response from the young friar. "And what about when there was snow here?" the Provincial persisted a little taken back. "Yes, also then," he responded. "Well," Father Benedetto then asked, "would you like to remain here or be moved elsewhere?" To this question, however, he did not receive a direct answer, but rather a complete commitment to obedience: "It is your Most Reverend Father who must decide. I only obey."

Still unsure on what decision to make with this fellow friar who was like a son to him, the Father Provincial, asked the Friars of the community if they thought it advisable or not that, because of his alleged lung infection, he stay in a place where there were young friars studying. It was Padre Pio himself, however, who reassured him that his illness was not infectious, that it was meant "for him and not for others" and he was permitted to remain in San Giovanni Rotondo and appointed as the spiritual director of the seraphic seminary.

Padre Pio committed himself totally to this new responsibility seeing it as something "serious and demanding," in fact, almost overpowering. The primary difficulty was to surmount the hardships brought on by the war, but also "the reservation and shyness of the seminarians," who however, he was soon able to win over by "his warmth of heart and openness," especially with "those large, profound luminous eyes of his" full of such "simplicity and childlike goodness" and that gave one a "feeling of such great trust."

His "humility and modesty" did not go unnoticed by the students, "his holiness was becoming known" and stories began to circulate "of inexplicable events taking place in the friary."

Padre Pio on his part prepared himself by "the studying of ascetical books, especially Sacred Scripture;" he taught the college students with "conferences centered wholly on the love of the Lord on religious piety;" he taught them, by word and example, how to prepare themselves well "for holy Communion" and how to make a proper thanksgiving; he heard their confessions and prayed with them, so much so that one of the students, aspiring to the priesthood, considered that "his most important example as a teacher came from the choir loft," where he spent "long hours of the day and up until midnight in faithful adoration on his knees before Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament;" he assisted them like a mother during their illnesses; he accompanied them on their walks around the friary; he kept watch over them when,



Students of the Seraphic College

At the beginning of October, Padre Pio was struck down with a fever and was sent to the hospital again, where a visit, at the end of the month, from his Provincial was able to give him some relief. His complete relief came at the beginning of November, when he was granted a further four months of leave.

The four months flew by and on 6 March 1918, he was back again in Naples. This time everything went as he hoped and on 16 March 1918, the document authorizing his rejection from the military because of double bronchial alveolitis, was signed.



Padre Pio handing out Miraculous Medals to the Servicemen

half an hour before lunch, they cleaned the friary and church; he would take part in their recreations and, when he was unable, he would watch over them from a window; he even offered himself as a victim on behalf of their perfection. And, even though he had motives "to thank the heavenly Father" for the progress he saw "in most of them," he still remained "not fully satisfied" will all of them.

Padre Pio would not leave them alone even at night. His bed was positioned in a room beside the dormitory with a window from where he could keep an eye on them.

Here, one night, the students experience something that confirmed the rumors that were going about their spiritual guide. While they were sleeping they heard "a loud noise" and a little later the voice of Padre Pio crying "Our Lady! Our Lady!...", over and over. And as well as his moans, an unearthly laughter and noises of beating irons and chairs were heard.

The next morning, one of the students, awoke before the hour of rising, saw in the half light that the metal bars that held the curtains around the bed of Padre Pio were on the ground all twisted and Padre Pio was sitting in a chair "with a swollen face and black eye." The boy went to him at once asking: "Padre, Padre, but what happened last night?"

Padre Pio did not give an answer, but hugged him and tried to calm him down and telling him not to say anything about this to anyone. He repeated the same to all the other students. They obeyed his orders, but some days later, once their fear was over, their curiosity got the better of them and they began to pester Padre Pio to tell them what had really happened that night.

For a while he did not give in to their questions. Then, one night, having exhorted those young souls always to remember their night prayers he said to them: "Do you want to know why the devil gave me such a beating? It was, as your spiritual father, to defend one of you. The one concerned was undergoing a severe temptation against purity and, while he invoked Our Lady, he also called on me spiritually. Immediately I went to his help and given strength through **Our Lady's rosary**, we won the battle. The one who was tempted was freed of the temptation and fell asleep until morning. I continued the battle and was beaten, but I won the battle."



These extraordinary trials only worsened what were the natural difficulties of everyone. These were hard times, inside and outside the friary. The able men were fighting at the front. The war was the only activity that had no recession so that it was easier to purchase a gun than a loaf of bread. For the seminary students they were blessed by the Lord that they had as their director Padre Pio who accompanied them at table in the refectory eating "very little" at lunch and at supper nothing at all being "only physically present." Almost always, he would do the readings and his own food would be shared out amongst the students. Many friars too, had been called up to arms so that the running of the seminary was left entirely to Father Paolino and Padre Pio and a third friar, Brother Nicola da Roccabascerana, who was too old for service, but who was occupied full-time as the questuant (contact point) friar and hence was the principal fount to provide food to the friary.

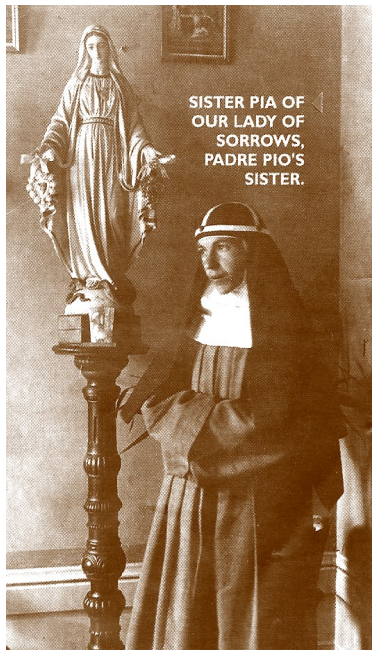
Already a few weeks after his arrival, on 28 November, he had to return to his hometown so as to present himself on 18 December, to the military in Naples, as his one year of leave because of sickness had ended.

On 6 January, he was back in San Giovanni Rotondo with a further leave of six months. But he was able to work no more than a few days. By the end of the month Padre Pio was in bed, his face was "flushed" from fever and he had "difficulty in breathing." He suffered terribly and even "the light" was painful to his eyes. He could "barely speak or move."

Before he called the doctor, Father Paolino took his temperature and was astounded when he saw "that the thermometer reached the maximum temperature and broke." The Father Guardian however, knew he was dealing with someone "exceptional" and so he did not lose his calm and went to fetch a "bath thermometer" from "his room and, after having removed it from its wooden frame," placed it under the armpit of his confrere. When he read his temperature he was amazed to see that it was 52 degrees Celsius (about 120 degrees Fahrenheit).

Father Paolino then called the doctor at once who "examined the patient thoroughly," verified the very high temperature but unable to find anything wrong with him, prescribed "the usual remedy for a strong bout of flu." Nine days later the fever left Padre Pio completely and he was able to get up from bed and resume life as before.

In the middle of May, Padre Pio had been absent himself again, this time to company Graziella, his sister, to Rome where she was entering a convent of Brigandine nuns where she took the name of Sister Pia of Our Lady of Sorrows. They left Pietrelcina



together and took the Express train from Benevento to Rome, traveling third class. Father Benedetto at the station of Caianello joined them.

On the 23rd of that month Padre Pio was back in San Giovanni Rotondo spiritually rejuvenated from his visit to Rome where he went to the basilicas of St. Peter and of St. Paul and prayed at the apostles' tombs. On 1 July, he had another tiring but spiritually rewarding day when he accompanied the seminarians on pilgrimage on foot to the shrine of St. Michael the Archangel.

A month and a half later, when his second leave was ended, Father Benedetto advised him "not to present himself unless he was personally summoned." But a notification arrived promptly by telegraph and Padre Pio was obliged on 19 August to go to Naples.

This time, after a long bout of sickness and different visits to the Military Hospital and to the First Medical Clinic of the Policlinic run by the University, where he was not even allowed to celebrate Mass, despite his being diagnosed with "an infiltration of the lungs" aggravated by "bronchial catarrh and malnourishment," Padre Pio was passed "fit for internal service" and assigned to the fourth platoon of the Tenth Medical Company, at the Naples "Sales" barracks.

This was the final judgment of the Colonel doctor after a check up that consisted of no more than "a glance without any examination." The Father Provincial at this point had to find a remedy fast. He could not leave Father Paolino responsible for everything in San Giovanni Rotondo and so he took with him to San Marco la Catola, the three oldest of the college students. Padre Pio on his part, fighting for his rights, turned to Father Agostino asking for help: "I would like you to write to Giovina so that she may get me a recommendation to these brutal superiors from a relative of hers who lives in Naples and must hold the very high office. Dear Father, we must convince ourselves that rights will not prevail today unless we have someone to recommend us. I would have liked to write to Giovina myself, but I haven't the strength and, moreover, they wouldn't allow me."

His health, in fact, got worse. As well as his suffering caused by his not being able to wear the habit, but a uniform that he referred to as "cursed rags," his stomach would not hold anything that he ate and the symptoms of his "haemoptysis" also begin.

With this news, Father Benedetto too, did what he could. He went to the Bishop of Lucera, Mgr. Lorenzo Chieppa and asked him to send "a forceful letter of recommendation to the superior of the Trinity Hospital" in Naples, who was the prelate's sister.