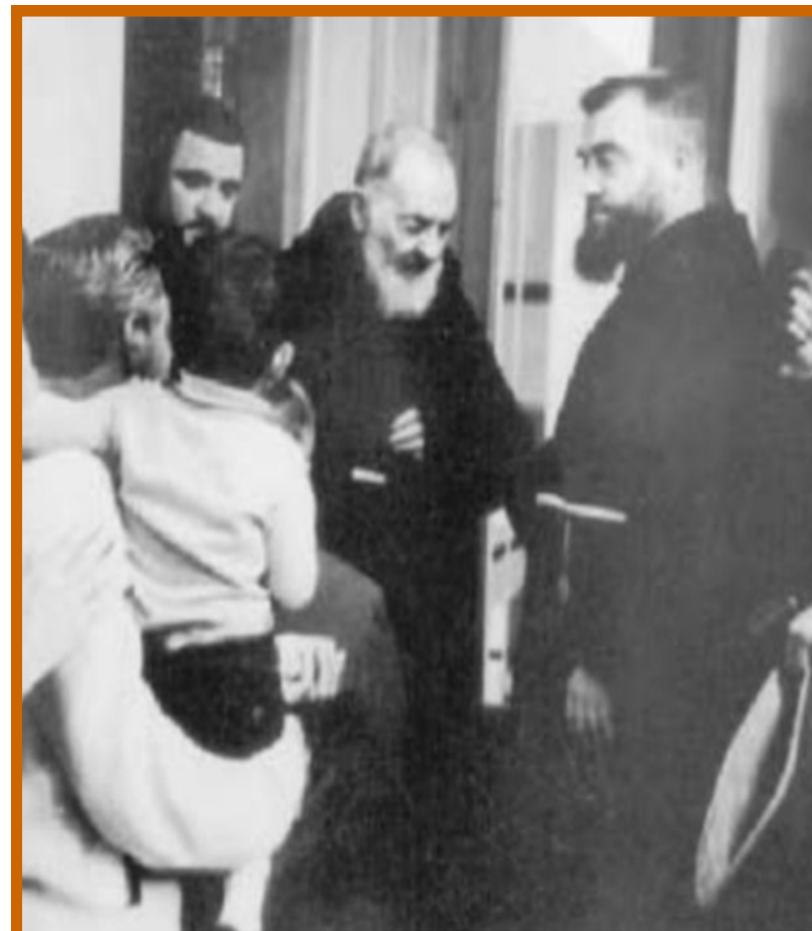


The visit to San Giovanni Rotondo proved to be a turning point in Emelio's life. His faith in God and his love for the Catholic Church, which had laid dormant for many years, began to grow and to be rekindled in his heart. When he returned to his home in California, he shared the message of Padre Pio with friends and neighbors and was instrumental in starting many Padre Pio prayer groups in the Los Angeles area. He is still spreading the message today.



SAN GIOVANNI ROTONDO

Padre Pio and Emelio Noriega



Emelio Noriega holding his son for Padre Pio's blessing

On Padre Pio's Chalice Emilio saw the face of Christ bleeding and crowned with thorns

Padre Pio and Emelio Noriega

Emelio Noriega, although raised a Catholic, had become indifferent to his faith and to the spiritual dimension of his life. His attitude changed completely when he read a book on Padre Pio. He found the book so interesting that he read it four times. Emelio had assumed Padre Pio had passed away. When he found out that he was still living in San Giovanni Rotondo, although elderly and in very poor health, he decided that he needed to go immediately to Italy and meet him.

When Emelio's employer told him that he could not allow him to take the time off from work, he arranged for his brother to substitute at his job until his return. Securing a loan from the bank proved to be a greater obstacle. "So you want a loan to take a vacation," the loan officer said. "No, not at all," Emelio answered him. "This is not for a vacation. It is a necessity. I have got to get to Italy as fast as I can. I am going to see a priest." Unfortunately he did not qualify for any type of loan. He had not worked for his current employer long enough and he had no letter of recommendation and reference. The loan officer reviewed with him, each paper in his file. He was sorry but nothing could be done. Something told Emelio not to leave the bank but to try one more time. "Surely there must be something that can be done," Emelio said. "No, there is nothing," the bank employee replied. To prove it, he picked up Emelio's file to show him again and there in the papers was the letter that was needed, a letter that Emelio had never requested and knew nothing about. It was from the Social Security Department and although unsigned, it was accepted.

Emelio was full of anticipation when he and his wife Evelyn and their two little children touched down in Italy in June, 1966. When they arrived at the monastery in San Giovanni Rotondo, the first person they met was Padre Pio Maria, Padre Pio's assistant. With a big smile on his face he greeted Emelio and said, "Oh, I see you have arrived. We have been expecting you." The words seemed very mysterious to Emelio for he had told no one he was coming to this remote monastery in Southern Italy.

The next day, Padre Pio Maria asked Emelio if he would like to serve at the altar at Padre Pio's Mass. Emelio had been away from the sacraments for a long time and could not remember the duties of the altar server. He told the priest that if he would let him carefully observe the altar server that morning, he would be able to remember and could assist the following day. Padre Pio Maria agreed.

The morning that Emelio served Padre Pio's Mass, he felt confident. At the appointed time, he took the Book of the Gospels to Padre Pio for the scripture reading. When the time came to take the chalice to Padre Pio, Emelio looked at it but could not pick it up. There on Padre Pio's chalice he saw the face of Christ, bleeding and crowned with thorns. He looked up to see if it might be a reflection on the wall but it was not. Another person had to step forward and take the chalice to Padre Pio.

After the Mass, Padre Pio went to the sacristy to make his thanksgiving in front of a statue of Our Lady of Fatima. Padre Pio Maria directed Emelio to kneel behind him. With his eyes lifted up to Heaven and with his face bathed in tears, Padre Pio whispered, "Tata, Perché?" (Father, why?) over and over. Emelio said to him, "Let me help you." "You don't know what you are asking," Padre Pio replied.

Later Padre Pio blessed Emelio's family. He told them to pray the Rosary every day. Emelio was holding his four-year-old son in his arms when Padre Pio said, "Your son is going to meet with much suffering in his life. I ask you to never, never abandon your child." The words frightened Emelio and Evelyn who loved their little son so much. The words also proved to be prophetic. As their son grew to adulthood, he experienced many sufferings – physical, mental and spiritual. He has been supported through his many trials by his parents' love and prayers.