

THE CRUCIFIX FROM WHICH PADRE PIO RECEIVED HIS STIGMATA

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Padre Pio
One With Christ, One With Sinners



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PADRE PIO HAD A SPECIAL MISSION TO LIVE THE WISDOM OF THE CROSS

A multitude of devoted

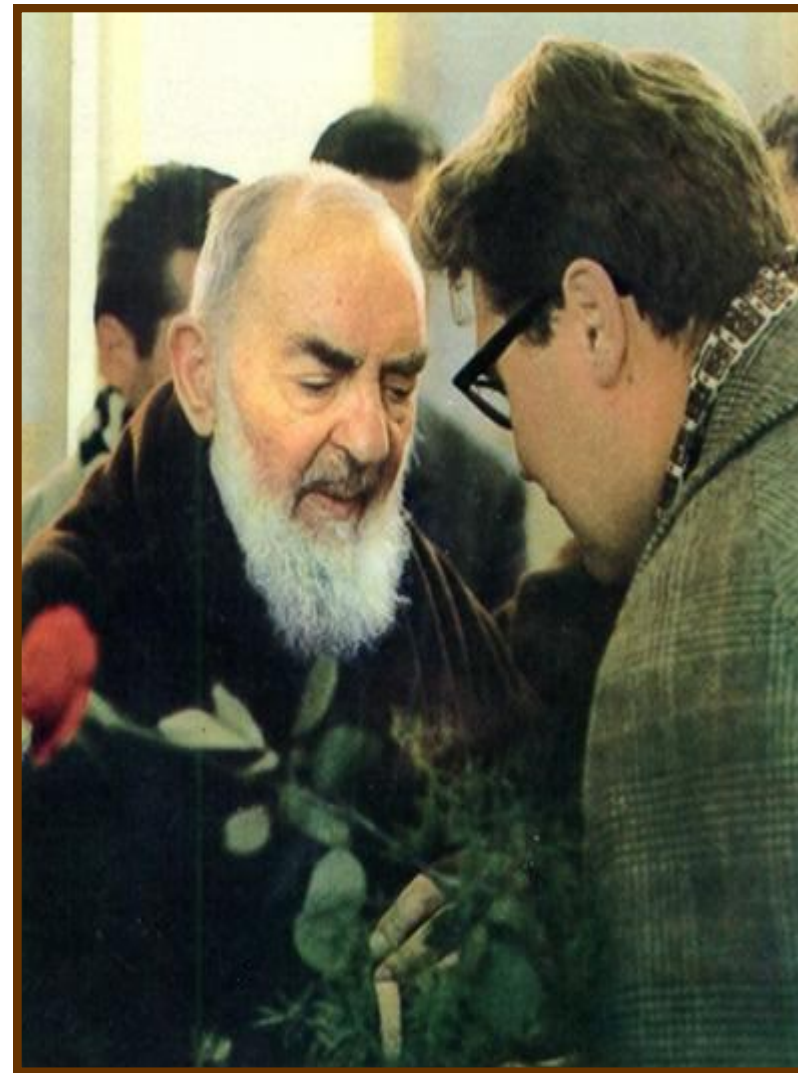
1. A well-known writer said, "*If there was an Oscar of popularity for saints, Padre Pio would win hands down. Rarely has there been a religious so widely loved and celebrated. His popularity rating has reached stardom, and not only among believers*" (R. Allegri in *P. Pio Immagini di santità*, Mondadori 1999, p. 9).

This may be a captivating piece of journalism, but it is theologically flawed. Indeed, with regard to saints, it is not so much their approval by men and women that counts but rather the favour they find with God, and here no classifications or grades are valid. All the attempts to compile hit parades have bordered on the ridiculous. Every day, when the Church lives the summit of Eucharistic faith, speaking of the saints, the faithful say these words: "*with all the saints who have done your will throughout the ages*" (Eucharistic Prayer II).

So saints, as such, please God before they please men. However, we cannot fail to note that the devotion for Padre Pio has grown out of all proportion among people from all walks of life. A true "world clientele", as Paul VI said (*Audience* of 20 February, 1971).

It has rightly been said that Blessed Padre Pio is the "people's saint", perhaps unconsciously highlighting once again, with his forthcoming Canonization, the charism of the Capuchin Franciscans to be close to the people.

The purpose of this reflection is to seek the foundation of the message of "*this humble Capuchin friar*", as the Pope said in his homily at the Mass in St Peter's Square for the Beatification of Padre Pio who "*by his life ...astonished the world*" cf. *L'Osservatore Romano*, n. 3; *ORE*, 5 May 1999, p. 1), and to highlight this message's urgency and timeliness. It is certainly not out of place to explain the attraction to Padre Pio felt by multitudes as a response to the "hunger for transcendence", to the need for the supernatural which still grips human beings even at the beginning of the third millennium, through the singular and evident mystical phenomena.



Padre Pio. It is from Evagrius Ponticus and says "A theory can be countered with another theory. But who can ever confute a whole life?".

A hundred and fifteen years have passed since 25 May 1887, the day when Francesco Forgione was born in Pietrelcina, where, to comply with Crispi's decree, throughout the Kingdom of Italy, all crucifixes were to be removed, even from schools. The child, Padre Pio, born that very year, was one day to become a living crucifix (R. Camilleri, *P. Pio*, Piemme, p. 6). Even more effectively as a saint, he will never let the Cross be taken down not just from the walls, but from the hearts in which it has been planted to bring salvation, to the point of becoming even a boast: "Far be it from me to glory except in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal 6,14).



Padre Pio One with Christ

An altar on the world

2. "How often', Jesus said to me just now, 'would you have abandoned me, my son, if I had not crucified you ... ?'" (Padre Pio, *La croce sempre pronta*, Città Nuova, 2002, p. 3).

Thus to try to understand Padre Pio is not so easy, despite his simplicity, because it is necessary to go far beyond appearances. The Blessed even said as much, speaking of himself: "What can I tell you about me? I am a mystery to myself" (*Epistolario*, I, p. 800. The *Epistolario* is the collection in four volumes of Padre Pio's correspondence, edited by Fr Gerardo di Flumeri).

If it is true, that every man and woman is born with a mission that Providence entrusts to each one to carry out during his/her earthly life, what was the special mission of the Blessed "stigmatic" from Gargano?

During the *ad limina* visit in April 1947, Pope Pius XII asked Bishop Andrea Cesarano of Manfredonia: "What does Padre Pio do?". The Bishop gave the clear, concise answer: "Your Holiness, he takes away the sins of the world" (cf. *P. Pio, Immagini di Santità*, Mondadori, 1999, p. 74).

Francesco Forgione made a constant offering of himself as a victim of love on the altar, where he lived Christ's Passion, and in the confessional, where actually he lived compassion with the sinner. He became one with Christ in the Eucharistic immolation and with the penitent in the confessional to reconcile souls with God.

Padre Pio was a great apostle of the confessional. He exercised this ministry for 58 years, giving hours and hours, morning and evening, to those who came to him from near and far: men and women, sick and healthy, rich and poor, clergy and lay people. In his cause for canonization this is certainly his major claim to glory, the test of his holiness and the brightest example he left priests throughout the world, of this century and of the centuries to come (*ibid.*).

He told his confreres in confidence: "Souls are not given as a gift: they are bought. Don't you know what they cost Jesus? They must be paid for with the same coin" (*ibid.*).

The man who knew suffering

3. Referring to his entry into the Order of Capuchin Franciscans in November 1922, he wrote: "O God ... from that moment you entrusted a

very important mission to your son. A mission known to you and me alone... O God ... I hear a voice deep within me saying: sanctify yourself and sanctify others" Epistolario, III, p. 1010). Sanctifying is not only meant in the moral, but also in the sacrificial sense, for the sanctification and salvation of souls.

He was aware he had been chosen by God as a collaborator in the redemptive work of Christ, through love and the Cross.

Crucified with Christ, it was no longer he who lived, but Christ who lived in him, as with the Apostle Paul (cf. Gal 2,19). Padre Pio chose the Cross, convinced that his whole life, like that of his Master, would be "a martyrdom". In June 1913, he wrote to Fr Benedetto, his spiritual director: "*The Lord shows me, as in a mirror, that my whole future will be nothing but martyrdom*" (Epistolario, I, p. 368).

However, this clear vision of his uncertain and tormented future neither troubled nor discouraged him. Indeed, in the depths of his soul he rejoiced in having been called to cooperate in the salvation of souls through suffering, which draws value and effectiveness from real participation in the Cross of Jesus (Epistolario, I, p. 303).

Consequently, Padre Pio willingly and joyfully accepted from the Lord all the suffering of body and soul he experienced and heard God's voice in his heart calling him more and more insistently to sacrifice and to immolate himself for his brethren (cf. Epistolario, I, p. 328f.).

Most people are probably unaware of this aspect. Other things about Padre Pio are emphasized which are easier to understand and accept, but if the reality of the Cross were removed from Padre Pio's life and spirituality, he would be emptied of holiness. The Cross for him was not a single episode but a whole outlook on life, for he lived his entire life in the shadow of the Cross for the glory of God, his personal sanctification and the salvation of his brethren. He learned entirely and always at the school of Christ the Master, who freely and lovingly accepted the Father's will: "*Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me.... Then I said, 'Lo I have come to do your will, O God'*" (Heb 10,5).

The two most important biographies of Padre Pio (by Fr Fernando da Riese Pio X, *Padre Pio da Pietrelcina, Crocifisso senza croce*, San Giovanni Rotondo 1974; Alessandro da Ripabottoni, *Padre Pio da Pietrelcina il Cireneo di tutti*, San Giovanni Rotondo 1994) have as subtitles respectively "*Crocifisso senza croce*" and "*il Cireneo di tutti*" (*Crucified without the Cross; The Cyrenian for Everyone*): *two emphases intended to highlight the essential aspect of his spirituality*. Indeed, after the example of Christ, Padre Pio lived as one crucified from 1910 to 1968, carrying both his cross and the cross of the suffering human beings who turned to him.

In March 1948, the Padre wrote to a Discalced Carmelite: "*One day, when we are granted to see the full noon-day light, we will recognize and value, how great is the*

Our Blessed often used the image of Simon of Cyrene carrying the Cross of Jesus. He encouraged people to persevere on the painful way of purification and trial, offering himself to be their Cyrene, to carry the Cross with them, indeed to replace them, taking their suffering on himself and leaving them all the merit. In fact, his crucified life taught him to become the Cyrenian of all the crucified.

In Forgione's spirituality, suffering is not a punishment, but the most delicate love on God's part. What often makes moral suffering more acute, is the subtle temptation that convinces people that their sufferings are a punishment inflicted on them by God for their infidelities, and therefore a reproach for the bad state of their consciences for having strayed from the straight and narrow path of salvation and sanctification. In these cases, it is the spiritual director's task to make them understand that the state they are going through is neither a punishment for failings or infidelities, nor an expiation for their unconscious sins, nor the revenge of divine justice. On the contrary: it is a trial of special love for privileged souls chosen to share in the sorrowful mysteries of the Redeemer.

In 1918, Padre Pio remarked in a letter to Erminia Gargani: "*Keep calm and be certain that these shadows and sufferings of yours are not a punishment brought on by your transgression ... ; you are one of the many chosen souls who are tried like gold in the furnace. This is the truth, and were I to say otherwise, I would lack in sincerity and do harm to the truth*" (Epist. III, p. 716).

He also urged Assunta Di Tommaso: "*This state is not a punishment, but love and a most refined love. Therefore bless the Lord and resign yourself to drinking the cup of Gethsemane*" (Epist III, p. 441). The encouragement that Padre Pio gives Maria Gargani is likewise encouraging: "*Do not fear, because the One who is keeping you nailed to the Cross loves you and is breathing into you the strength to bear the unbearable martyrdom and the love to love divine Love in bitterness*" (Epist. III, p. 333). "*Have great confidence in his mercy and kindness, for he will never abandon you; but this must not prevent you from closely embracing his Cross*" (Epist. III, p. 935).

What has been said can bring us closer to Padre Pio as the man of the Cross. Bl. Padre Pio's important message, more than ever, introduces us to this needed feature: a theology of the Cross, enlightened by the glory of the Resurrection, without which Christianity would have no foundation. The forthcoming canonization of Bl. Padre Pio, will certainly spur us to strengthen our roots as disciples of the crucified and risen Lord. I am pleased to make my own, the epigraph that Vittorio Messori chose to sum up the biography of another blessed but which is equally applicable to

Padre Pio wrote: "*Jesus is always with you, even when it seems to you that you cannot feel his presence. He is never so close to you as in spiritual struggles. He is always there, close to you, encouraging you to fight the good fight; he is there to ward off the enemies' blows so that they do not harm you*" (Epist. II, p. 156).

Lastly, it should be noted that being a victim, in traditional ascetic language, means giving oneself over totally to be habitually sacrificed for love of the Lord. It presupposes a complete and definitive renunciation of all that could in any way impede the divine will. It means being able to say at every moment "*I always do what is pleasing to him*" (Jn 8,29).

This is the experience of Padre Pio: "*Daughter, know that I am stretched out on my bed of pain, I have ascended to the altar of burnt offerings and await the fire from on high so that the victim may soon be consumed. When you pray, make the urgent request that the devouring flames come swiftly*" (Epist. III, p. 738).

To offer ourselves as victims for the salvation of souls is what Christ himself desired, not because he needs us human creatures but because in his eternal designs he preferred to make use of the members of his Mystical Body to bring about the plan of redemption.

Saint Pio encouraged souls to live this mystery and thus to complete what *was lacking in Christ's sufferings for the sake of the Church* (Col 1, 24).

The Way of the Cross, the way of privileged souls

7. This grace is granted to those who are called to fulfill more intimately the ideal of perfection. Those who are called to set out on this path must be convinced that God has lovingly chosen them to walk on a way that is humanly so arduous and so unappealing, as Padre Pio never fails to point out.

In his teaching, the Blessed Capuchin made no attempt to conceal or play down the difficulties of the way he had chosen. He well knew the fears, the endless hours of a struggle which the risk of defeat made all the more dangerous. He therefore strove to make others aware of the fruits of suffering accepted and shared with Christ, obeying St Paul, "*Take your share in the suffering like a good soldier of Jesus Christ*" (cf. II Tm 2,3).

Our Blessed found clear, pure formulas, words accessible to all, convincing tones to help others persevere on the difficult climb to Calvary to be united with Christ for ever in the glory of Tabor.

Padre Pio knew and repeated that suffering in itself is not desirable, and that human nature instinctively shuns it as alien to happiness. Christians will strive to meet it for theological and supernatural reasons. He sought to make suffering souls understand all this.

treasure, that we earned from our earthly sufferings for the homeland that will have no end. From generous souls and from those in love, God expects acts of heroism and fidelity so that, after the ascent of Calvary, they may reach Mount Tabor".

These words sum up the thrust of a spiritual programme centred on the mystery of the Passion and Death of Jesus and learned from him as he taught them "*at the school of suffering*" (*Fr Gerardo di Flumeri, Epist. II, p. 453*) "*of sacrifice*" (Epist. III, p. 106), and "*of the cross, through which alone our souls can be made holy*", as is explained time and again in the *Epistolario*.

Padre Pio was able to demonstrate his unmistakable gifts as a true spiritual teacher; he succeeded in forming "*generous souls in love with God*", nourished by the wisdom of the Cross and whom he bound to follow the teachings of this "*school*" by his example and his words.

Perhaps in no other area of his ascetical and mystical teaching did he reach such lofty heights. According to Melchiorre da Poblatura (*Alla scuola spirituale di Padre Pio da Pietrelcina, San Giovanni Rotondo, 1978*), this special and most characteristic aspect of his has three dimensions: the spirituality of the cross; the content of the cross; and the methodology he used in forming and guiding the souls entrusted to his care.

The spirituality of the cross

4. The doctrine of suffering that purifies and the theology of pain that saves is the basic theme of Bl. Padre Pio's teaching in spiritual direction and also constitutes his personal commitment in the ascetical path toward holiness. He lived and proposed this programme because it is rooted in the Gospel and reflected in Christ's life and doctrine.

Padre Pio's exterior stigmata make a deep impression on the superficial observer. However, they are not important from the theological viewpoint of their clinical aspect but rather for what they demonstrate: his total transfiguration to the crucified and risen Christ. These visible wounds are a manifestation of what St Gregory of Nyssa calls "*spiritual wounds*", which procure an agonizing love that assimilates him to the beloved. Padre Pio's experience was exalting even if tragic (Epist. I, pp. 300, 522...).

The Cross, whatever name people may give it, whatever painful aspect it manifests, has a central place in the life of Christians. The man with the stigmata from Gargano understood it, lived it and proposed it. He did not offer a scientifically worked-out programme but he had crystal clear ideas on God's saving plan, that developed around the Cross of Christ the

Redeemer. He deeply penetrated the riches of the mystery of the cross, "*folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God*" (I Cor 1, 18).

It was enough for him to contemplate the Cross, the way of life of Jesus, the incarnate Word and the crucified One, and make his message of salvation alive and active. For him, Jesus' Passion and Death were a historical and existential event. The straight-forward task of Christians seriously committed to achieving holiness is simply to accept that message, to put it into practice, to have a vital encounter with the crucified Christ without a lot of comment.

The content of this spirituality

5. In the present economy of grace and of salvation, the Cross was the means God chose to reconcile humanity with God the Father.

The Cross is not merely one episode in the earthly life of the incarnate Word, but an integral part of the mystery of the Incarnation. The cross, Christ proposed to and imposed on his followers, is not a mere condition for following him, but the most genuine expression of belonging to his kingdom. We are truly Christian only to the extent that we accept the Cross as the fundamental option of life.

When someone takes up his own cross, he becomes a witness of salvation among his brothers and sisters so that others may also share in this salvation, of which he is both the object and subject. With this free and generous choice, Christians become mediators and co-redeemers of their neighbor, under the influence of Christ, and dependent on him who will always be the one mediator and redeemer of humanity (cf. I Tm 2,5).

Jesus freely gave his life for all as the supreme and indisputable proof of his love for human beings, the most precious and highly esteemed gift that a man can make. Since his sacrifice, deeply religious Christians have intuited what divine love means through contemplation of the Cross under the influence of the Holy Spirit. This reality informs their spiritual life. The Cross became and becomes a magnetic pole and a center of outreach.

"By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (I Jn 3, 16). Clearly, Padre Pio accepted this invitation, with all its consequences, and became an apostle and teacher of this message of crucified love.

Padre Pio confided to his friend Fr Agostino: "*When Jesus wants me to know that he loves me, he lets me feel in his Passion, his wounds, the thorns, the anguish.... When he wants me to rejoice, he fills my heart with that spirit that is all fire, speaks to me of his delight ... Jesus, the man of sorrows, would like all Christians to imitate him.... By*

comparison my poor suffering is worth nothing, yet it pleases Jesus, because on earth he loved it so much" ... (Epist. I, pp. 335-336).

It is true that today people cannot understand how a God who is said to be good and a father can permit such suffering, especially among the innocent. There is everywhere a noticeable lack of the spiritual sensitivity required to understand how necessary it is to make reparation and expiate evil.

The mystery of the Cross in the Christian's life as well as in Christ's is of central transcendent and irreplaceable importance. The disciple cannot take any other way than the one pointed out by the Master, nor can he accept any other norm of life than the one the Master proclaimed. Christ, the Master, knew well that his norm would not be easy and would not give rise to enthusiasm. Yet he proclaims it categorically, with vigor, "*If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me*" (Mt 16,24).

The reasons for taking up one's own cross and for teaching others how to accept theirs

6. First of all, for every person who sincerely wants to seek God in following Christ, the way of the cross is the only way to take. There are no other paths that lead to holiness and salvation. The Cross becomes the identity card of the Christian, the seal of his authenticity and his "standard" (*Epist. II, p.175*).

The Cross is the one way to salvation for all; all who are called to a deeper and more perfect realization of Christ's mysteries must follow it to the very end.

This is what the Gospel teaches, according to the Blessed of Pietrelcina. "*The grain of wheat does not bear fruit unless it is deposited and germinates; likewise souls need the trial of suffering in order to emerge from it purified*" (*Epist. II, p. 442*).

The second reason why we must embrace the Cross is because Christ always carried the burden of the Cross and no one will ever be worthy of him unless he follows him and shares in his suffering. Living with Christ on the Cross is the most sublime ideal of every Christian. No one can climb alone. Christ always walks before us carrying his Cross and ours, and guiding our footsteps that often falter. Jesus will never abandon anyone who, through love of him, walks on bearing the weight of his cross, and the troubled will always find in this consoling thought the strength to persevere.