

beautiful children, the last being twins. The twins were born on the feast of Our Lady of Grace, the patroness of San Giovanni Rotondo. Padre Pio didn't just bring us together, he has taken care of us ever since. His fatherly care and love has been with us for almost forty years of married life.



Ortrud and Germain Bianchi and some of their children and grandchildren with the wedding picture given to them by Padre Pio.

Padre Pio, we love you, Padre Pio, we thank you, Padre Pio, we need you to pray to God for us till we shall meet again.

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Padre Pio and Ortrud Bianchi



Fr. Ermelindo celebrating the wedding Mass of Germain and Ortrud Bianchi in San Giovanni Rotondo

He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can fathom the work that God does from beginning to end. I know that nothing is better for them than to rejoice, and to do good in their lives.

Ecclesiastes 3:11-12

Padre Pio and Ortrud Bianchi

My name is Ortrud Bianchi and I was born in 1945 in Ronsperg, Czech Republic, the youngest of six children. Several months after my birth, we settled in a small town in Germany. My parents, Sieplinde and Erhard Schumann divorced when I was five years old. There was no religious atmosphere in our home but I did receive religious instruction in school as well as the sacraments of the Catholic Church. On rare occasions, my brother and I attended church. Watching my mother's difficult life as a divorcee convinced me that I would remain single.

When I was a teenager, my maternal grandmother who lived in Austria, died unexpectedly. My mother traveled to the funeral and decided to remain in Austria. She realized that life can end abruptly and by the grace of God, she began to practice her Catholic faith with great fervor, making up for lost time.

As a result of my mother's move to Austria, I joined my oldest sister and her husband in Landshut, Germany and finished my schooling there. I looked forward to school vacations so that I could be with my mother in Austria. However, I soon noticed that my mother was on a major mission to convert us children. The more she tried to convert us, the more our opposition grew. I finally made my mother promise not to mention religion to me anymore, otherwise I would discontinue my visits to her. My mother complied. The next time I saw her, she kept silent about her faith in God. When it was time to say goodbye, she handed me a small pamphlet to take home with me. On the cover of it was a picture of Jesus. That was a dead give away to me that it was a religious pamphlet, therefore boring and a waste of time to read. But I took it anyway, in order to avoid an argument.

Months passed and Easter vacation was about to begin. The pamphlet! Suddenly I remembered. Without fail, my mother's first question would be to ask me how I liked it. The easiest solution would be to read just one small page and then I would be off the hook.

Our wedding was on the Feast of the Assumption, August 15, 1968. Padre Pio no longer performed weddings in his later years due to his poor health but he was taken in his wheelchair to meet us before the wedding ceremony began. Germain thanked him for everything. Padre Pio blessed our wedding rings and gave us his blessing. Then he tapped me three times on my head. I felt as though he had opened a valve inside of me for I felt a happiness that was indescribable. By the end of the day I said, "God has to take this feeling away for I feel my heart is ready to burst with joy."

Our wedding took place in the church of Our Lady of Grace where Padre Pio had received the stigmata, celebrated Mass for most of his life, and heard daily confessions. Father Ermelindo celebrated the wedding Mass. In the afternoon, Brother Joseph Pius and Father Ermelindo surprised us at the wedding reception with their presence. Brother Joseph Pius made this announcement to us, "Germain and Ortrud, I hope you will enjoy this wedding gift from Padre Pio. Because he is often sick, he no longer signs pictures or cards. Instead, we sign them for him. I asked him what I should write on the back of this picture of Our Lady of Grace and Padre Pio answered me, "Give me the picture and let me sign it myself." Padre Pio wrote, "Maria vi tenga stretta nel sua amore." (May the Virgin Mary hold you tightly in her love.) For our honeymoon we did not go to a beach resort or vacation spot. We stayed in San Giovanni Rotondo for several weeks, the best place on earth.

One month after our wedding, we heard the very sad news that Padre Pio had died. We went to San Giovanni Rotondo to attend the funeral. As we stood in line to pass by Padre Pio's coffin and pay our last respects, an Italian woman kept tapping me on the shoulder, advising me to ask Padre Pio for something when I paused at his casket. I did what she suggested. As I stood at his coffin, I prayed, "Padre Pio, please bless our marriage with a child." Nine months later, our first son was born. It is said that our prayers are often answered in a more abundant way than what we ask. We were blessed with eight

many other women there as well. Padre Pio would be passing within two feet of me and at that time I planned on speaking to him about Germain.

Brother Joseph Pius, one of the Capuchins who lived at the monastery, approached me and motioned for me to follow him. I told him that I was in an excellent spot to talk to Padre Pio but he insisted that I go with him. I was not thrilled to give up my good place in the front row but I followed Brother Joseph Pius. He led me through the big church, unlocked the door to the monastery and gave me orders to wait there in the middle of a long hallway. A few minutes later he reappeared with Germain, whom he had found in the upstairs hallway waiting with the men for Padre Pio to pass by. He told Germain to stand next to me and then he left without any explanation.

Before we could figure out who had arranged this interesting happening, the door at the end of the hallway opened and Padre Pio, aided by two friars, entered. Knowing that Padre Pio could see into the souls of people, my first reaction was to look down toward the floor and avoid eye contact. Instead, I looked straight into his beautiful brown eyes the entire time he was walking slowly towards us. When he reached us, he stopped. He put his hand on Germain's head, then on my head and with one blessing, he blessed us both together. No words were spoken, no angel appeared, but I received my sign. I knew at that moment that Germain and I were meant to be together and to marry.



I continued to visit Padre Pio every time I had a vacation.

On August 15, 1967, Germain and I became officially engaged. Germain had an engagement ring made for me from a gold miraculous medal surrounded by tiny pearls. Padre Pio kept the ring in his room for many days and blessed it in time for our engagement.

I was home alone and opened the pamphlet randomly. It was from the diary of the Polish nun, Sister (now Saint) Faustina Kowalska. My eyes fell on the text where Jesus explained to Sister Faustina that His mercy was greater than any human or angelic mind could ever fathom. Jesus invited every soul, no matter how sinful, to draw close to His merciful heart. The words hit me like lightning. Jesus loves me! Why be indifferent to the One who loves me more than I can ever imagine? Overwhelmed by deep emotions of contrition, I felt a force that brought me to my knees. I began to cry and I repeated over and over, "Jesus, from now on I want to be your friend."

The next morning, Sunday, I got up and got ready for church while a puzzled and disbelieving sister and brother-in-law looked on. I made my way to church for confession and Mass. I never missed another Sunday Mass after that and I began to pray for all of the members of my family.

By July, 1964, I lived with my mother in Austria. Two years later, my youngest brother and his fianc were meeting the rest of the family in Rome for their wedding. They mailed the necessary documents for the wedding to Rome and made sure that they were certified, insured and registered. The documents for their wedding disappeared and were never found. Because of that, they were not able to get married.

While everyone was devastated that there would be no wedding, my mother cheerfully announced that she had "Plan B." A friend had recently informed her of a holy monk, Padre Pio, who had the stigmata and lived in San Giovanni Rotondo. What a perfect opportunity it would be to visit him, since everyone was already in Rome. As we traveled to Padre Pio's monastery, I became more and more excited at the thought of seeing a saint.

Our first experience was to be present for the opening of the church doors at 4:50 a.m. for Padre Pio's 5:00 a.m. Mass. People started to push and shove, causing my brother-in-law to lose his shoe. Another person's glasses flew off. Inside the church, people were racing down the middle aisle and jumping over the pews. It was like a sports event.

Then Padre Pio entered the sanctuary. He looked old, weak and even sickly. I could tell that he was suffering and I felt sorry for him. I thought it would be better for him to have some bed rest rather than to be surrounded by people who seemed more devoted to him than to Jesus and Mary. "Why do these people bother Padre Pio, trying to talk to him and touch him?" I said to myself. "I think they are on the wrong track. They are misled. Don't they know that we have Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament? We don't have to run after a person!"

I watched Padre Pio celebrate Mass and nothing extraordinary happened. Somehow I expected holiness to be radiating from him that would at least cause me to have some goose-bumps. Nothing happened inside of me. My final resolve was that I had seen Padre Pio once and that was good enough. There was no need to ever return to San Giovanni Rotondo again.

Two years later, my mother and a young man who was a fellow member of the Legion of Mary and I made a pilgrimage to the shrine of Our Lady of Loreto in Italy. We had a wonderful time there. My mother suggested that we drive to San Giovanni Rotondo to see Padre Pio. It was a distance of at least 230 miles and there were no highways at that time to get there, only small roads. I told my mother that our car was too old and unreliable to make the trip. Besides, she had already seen Padre Pio. However, all my reasoning with my mother was to no avail. She told me that if I would not take her, she would walk the distance by herself. I told my mother that I would take her but only because I was a good daughter.

I began by saying, "I am not interested in any close relationships. I am very happy being single and I want to remain single. I don't want to divide my love for Jesus. I like to go to church whenever I please and pray. I love being a religious education teacher. I would never want to take the chance of getting married. These days people make promises and later it is a different story."

Germain listened and after a pause, he responded to each point I had made. He said to me, "You are very happy to be single but it is also possible to be happy as a married person. You should never divide your love for Jesus. Neither would I. Rather we would help each other to love Jesus more and more. And I would never be unfaithful to you. You have my word."

"Ortrud, stick to your principles," I said to myself. "Don't give in. Don't get weak!" But I could feel my heart softening just a bit. "Why are we discussing marriage?" I said to Germain. "I don't even know you and you don't know me." "I know you well enough," Germain said, "that I would like to ask you to marry me. When we were sitting in the car and you asked me to pray the Rosary with you, you were the first girl that ever asked me to pray the Rosary. I knew then that I wanted you to be my wife."

The next day Germain took a train to San Giovanni Rotondo. In confession, he told Padre Pio that he met a girl that he wanted to marry but that she was not sure about him. Padre Pio, a man of few words, advised him, "Marry her and prepare well for your marriage." Germain heard what he wanted to hear but I still needed my own sign.

At Christmas time, I went to San Giovanni Rotondo and Germain was there with me. I wanted to ask Padre Pio about marrying Germain. One day I happened to have an excellent position in the front row of a crowded sacristy. There were

That day I ran into the young man again. I learned that he was an American studying medicine in Rome. He had arrived in Rome in August but his school was closed until September. He felt inspired to spend his free time in San Giovanni Rotondo near Padre Pio.

There was no lack of German-speaking pilgrims at the monastery and one day I met a woman named Adelinde from Austria. She urged me to pray for her intention. She confided to me that she was anxious about traveling alone and that she would like Padre Pio to send her a traveling companion for her return trip back to Austria.

I told her that her worries were over. Padre Pio had answered her prayers and she was looking at her traveling companion. The idea popped into my mind that it would be great to have a man in the car, in case we had a flat tire. Adelinde agreed and the American was offered a free ride to Rome which he accepted. Leaving San Giovanni Rotondo the following week was extremely painful to me. The thought of returning soon was the only thing that made it bearable. The three of us traveled to Rome together and once in Rome, Adelinde had some business to take care of and excused herself for a half hour.

While waiting in the car for Adelinde to return, I suggested to the American that we pray the Rosary together. I led the first part of the Hail Mary in German and he answered in English. Adelinde came back and we continued our journey. On the way to the hotel to drop off the American, I felt a hand on my right shoulder. It was the American. The strange thing was that it did not feel like a human hand. I experienced the exact same powerful feeling in my body as when Padre Pio put his hand on my head. The feeling lasted as long as the young man's hand was on my shoulder. Before leaving the car, he handed me a piece of paper with his name and address and asked for mine. The card he handed me said, "Germain Bianchi, Yonkers, New York."

Several days after I returned to my home in Austria, the doorbell rang and when I opened the door, there stood the American. I wanted to introduce him to my mother but I could not remember his name. He came to visit me again, just three weeks later. Traveling such a long distance to see me, alarmed me, so I had a talk with him.

It wasn't too long before our 1949 Volkswagen broke down. Our friend from the Legion of Mary had to hitchhike back to the previous town and since he did not speak Italian, he had to try to explain in sign language the car parts he needed to purchase in order to fix our car. My mother and I sat in a ditch as we prayed the Rosary and waited for him to return.

It took several hours to get the car running again. About 9:00 p.m. the car broke a second time. There was no mechanic shop anywhere near and by now, everything was closed. We grabbed our few belongings, locked the car, and hitchhiked through the night to San Giovanni Rotondo. When we reached the monastery at 5:00 a.m., my mother was overjoyed and made a solemn proclamation, "Isn't God good! We have arrived on time for Holy Mass." After Mass, we met a German lady on the plaza in front of the church. She knew how to get tickets to go to confession to Padre Pio and how to get tickets to enter the sacristy where Padre Pio passed after the morning confessions.

My mother obtained tickets and the next morning along with about fifteen other women, we were ushered into the old sacristy. It was no big deal for me. This time around I knew better than to expect anything. I knew that Padre Pio was just a human being. Yes, he might be a saint but I felt it was selfish to bother him the way the people did. "I will just play the game along with my mother," I said to myself.

The door opened and there stood Padre Pio. We all knelt down for his blessing as he passed in front of each person. He stopped in front of my mother, looked at her and blessed her. I was next. He then placed his hand on my head. My whole body felt that touch. It felt like electricity going through my body and at the same time my soul was touched. I can't explain what happened but I knew that something had taken

place. I knew that a strong bond, a deep spiritual relationship between Padre Pio and myself had been established. He had become my spiritual father and I had become his adopted spiritual daughter. I ran outside the church and started to cry.

Back in Austria, I could not stop talking about Padre Pio. My two sisters, brother, brother-in-law, mother and I decided, only three weeks after my return from San Giovanni Rotondo, to take a trip together to see Padre Pio. Being back in San Giovanni Rotondo felt like being in Heaven and the days we spent there were pure happiness. We stayed for several weeks. I finally realized that the people who came to the monastery to see Padre Pio were not selfish like I had first thought. They were there for the same reason that I was there. Without even saying anything, Padre Pio was taking us closer to Jesus. Just looking at Padre Pio made you want to love Jesus more. He was like a magnet, drawing people closer and closer to God.

The morning of August 25, 1966 was our planned departure and we packed all our luggage in the trunk for our return trip back to Austria. At that moment, I decided to stay in San Giovanni Rotondo and I removed my bag from the car. As a religious education teacher, I still had three weeks of vacation left and I wanted to stay as long as possible. My family tried to reason with me and said to me, "You don't know the Italian language. You don't have money for a hotel. You don't have money for the train ticket back to Austria. You do not even have enough money for food!" "I am twenty-one years old and I can make my own decisions," I replied. I loved Padre Pio (like all those crazy Italian women) and all I cared about was to be near him.

After I said goodbye to my family, I went back to the church to pray. When I was near Padre Pio, all of my earthly desires seemed to disappear. Being close to him was like being on a retreat. During the afternoon, I asked about lodging but could not find anything in my price range. I asked the German lady who had befriended me if she knew of a place I could stay overnight but she did not know of anything.

After the evening Benediction service, everyone had to leave as the church doors were locked. Slowly, with my bag over my shoulder, I made my way across the plaza. My happy feeling made way for a pressing question, "What now? Where do I sleep?" I did not have money for a hotel and sleeping out in the open air under the stars made me nervous. Not only were there snakes in the area but also stray dogs.

I uttered a short prayer to Padre Pio, "Dear Padre Pio, I have never prayed to you for myself but now I need your help. Please help me to find a place to sleep tonight." As I finished my cry for help, I noticed that a young man who was sitting on a bench under a tree, got up and started walking toward me. We talked for a few minutes and then I informed him that I had to be on my way for I had to find a place to stay for the night. He asked me to wait on the bench and he would be back soon. With no place to go, the bench seemed very inviting.

Fifteen minutes passed and then he returned. "Come, follow me," he said. "I found a place for you to stay." We headed down a hill to the first house across from the monastery. He led me into the house, down the stairs and opened the door to a room furnished with three beds. Pointing to the bed on the right he said, "This one is yours. It is fifty cents a night." I thanked him and he left. Shortly after there was a knock at the door. To my surprise, it was the young man again. He handed me two paper bags, smiled and said, "This is for you. Good night." Inside the bags were two delicious sandwiches, an apple and a pear. My mind was racing. How did he know that I had not eaten a meal that day?

The next morning an Italian lady who stayed at the same residence invited me to a little room and served me a big dish of pasta with bread and wine. "Mangia, mangia," (eat, eat) she said but I really did not need any encouragement and I ate all the food.