



# Pray, Hope, and Don't Worry



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*"I felt that Padre Pio had a direct line to Heaven."*  
— Father Leo Fanning

## The Clergy Remembers Padre Pio Part II

*A note from the editors: We met Father Leo Fanning almost accidentally. We were in Northern New Jersey and had stopped for morning Mass on our way to New York. As we were leaving, we gave a Padre Pio newsletter to one of the parishioners. She told us that there was a priest just 40 miles away who had met Padre Pio during World War II and that we should take a detour and visit him. We did just that. Father Leo was happy to speak to us and to recall his memories of Padre Pio. We were deeply inspired by the story he shared with us.*

Leo Fanning, from Cornwall on the Hudson, New York, was drafted into military service during World War II and was assigned to the 304th Bomb Wing of the Fifteenth Air Force and stationed in Cerignola, Italy. He worked in the Battle Casualties Department where records were kept of soldiers who were wounded, missing in action, or killed in the line of duty. His work was a ministry of consolation.

In Cerignola, Leo observed how friendly the townspeople were to the allied soldiers. They were poor farming people for the most part, who had been reduced to destitution because of the war. One evening at the base, when Leo went outside to put the leftovers from supper in the garbage can, a number of little children, dressed in very poor clothing, begged him for the scraps of food that he was about to throw away. From that moment on, no unwanted food was ever thrown into the garbage. Leo did what he could to secure clothing for the children and food as well. He noticed that it was the children and the elderly who suffered the most from the terrible consequences of the war.

When Leo had free time from his work, it was his practice to gather the children of Cerignola together and teach them their catechism. Even though he spoke very little Italian, he managed to communicate with them. He prepared them for their first Holy Communion and also visited the homes of many of the residents in Cerignola, encouraging parents to permit their children to receive the sacrament of Confirmation.



*Padre Pio with Leo Fanning (beside him),  
Joe Asterita and Mario Avignone*

One evening, at the Cathedral of Ripalta, in Cerignola, the Bishop came to preside at the Mass and Benediction. Leo noticed the very disrespectful way that people were conversing with each other during the service. Leo could not contain himself. In a voice full of authority, he stood up and told all the people to be silent while the Bishop was celebrating Mass. One day a messenger came, summoning Corporal Leo Fanning to the Bishop's office. The Bishop told Leo how much he appreciated what he was doing with the children in town and how grateful he was that Leo had spoken to the people in church, advising them to stop talking.

Frequently in the evening, Leo would go to the Capuchin monastery in Cerignola to receive Holy Communion and to attend Benediction. The regulation was that the American soldiers were permitted to receive Holy Communion at any time when stationed in a combat zone. Padre Paolino of Casacalenda was the Provincial of the monastery and he often invited Leo and his two army buddies, Joe Asterita and Mario Avignone to come inside the monastery after Benediction to visit. Because the monastery had no heating, during the winter months the men would gather around a large container of burning charcoal to warm themselves while they talked together. Padre Paolino would often share stories of Padre Pio, who

lived 80 miles away in the Capuchin monastery of Our Lady of Grace in San Giovanni Rotondo. Hearing about Padre Pio, Leo, Joe and Mario decided they must take the first opportunity they could and visit him.

One day Leo had the opportunity to go with Joe to San Giovanni Rotondo. The first person they met at the monastery was Brother Gerardo. They told Brother Gerardo they had come from the military base at Cerignola and they wanted to meet Padre Pio. Brother Gerardo told them that it would be impossible. He pointed to the huge crowd of people who were assembled inside the church. "Are they waiting to go to Mass?" Leo asked. "No," said Brother Gerardo. "They have already been to Mass. They are all waiting to go to confession to Padre Pio."

Leo and Joe decided to stay and they hoped that they might be able to see Padre Pio later in the day. Finally, when the confessions were over, Leo and Joe had a chance to greet Padre Pio. Joe, who had already met Padre Pio on a previous occasion, spoke to him in his best Italian. "Padre Pio," he said, "I want to introduce you to my friend, Corporal Leo Fanning." "But that is not correct," Padre Pio said. "It is Father Leo Fanning." These words of Padre Pio's were a great encouragement and affirmation to Leo who had been considering entering the priesthood.

On another visit to the monastery, Leo was able to attend Padre Pio's Mass. His Mass lasted a long time, more than two hours, with long periods of silence throughout. "Padre Pio was not here with us for the whole Mass," Leo said. "His body was here but his soul was somewhere else. The Mass was beautiful. I felt that Padre Pio had a direct line to Heaven."

On his subsequent visits to San Giovanni Rotondo, Leo became acquainted with the Superior of the monastery, Padre Agostino of San Marco in Lamis. Padre Agostino had been Padre Pio's confessor and spiritual director for many years. Knowing that Padre Pio was a spiritually gifted soul who had received many special graces and privileges from the Lord, Padre Agostino held him in genuine veneration and their relationship of mutual esteem and deep friendship lasted more than fifty years. Padre Agostino kept a diary in which he recorded their conversations and experiences together.

Padre Agostino was barely five feet tall. Leo still remembers his twinkling blue eyes and his long flowing beard. His leadership in the monastery was marked by firmness, and a broad fatherly spirit. Padre Agostino ran a tight ship, yet was known for his kindness to all. Everyone held him in the highest respect.

Visitors often brought gifts of food and beverages to the monastery for the friars to enjoy, and Padre Agostino always made it a point to check the contents of every package and gift. Most items were allowed, but he would not permit the cigarettes that well-meaning visitors sometimes brought for the Capuchins. One time Leo and Joe brought a bag of candy to Padre Pio. After they had lunch with the friars, someone noticed that most of the candy was missing. Padre Pio said, "So the candy has been taken. Well, I know who took it." The

people who were standing nearby and heard these words of Padre Pio quickly left the area. Nothing could be hidden from Padre Pio and none of those who were guilty wanted to be "found out."

Angelina, who was a schoolteacher in Cerignola, was a friend of Leo's. From time to time, she was able to go to Our Lady of Grace monastery to visit Padre Pio. One day she told Leo that she sometimes perceived a beautiful fragrance, like perfume, not only when she was at Padre Pio's monastery, but also when she was home in Cerignola. The fragrance, Angelina explained, was a sign of Padre Pio's presence. Leo felt that Angelina was far out of reality to make such a statement. What she had said about the perfume was impossible. Leo concluded that Angelina was a nice person but nevertheless, a religious fanatic with an overactive imagination.

Shortly after that, Leo was working in his office on the military base and was hit with a wave of sweet-smelling perfume. He was alone. There were no flowers in the room or anything else that might have caused the fragrance. He was so shook up by the experience that he went to see the Army chaplain, Father Duggan. He needed to talk about what had just happened. As he was waiting to speak to Father Duggan, Joe Asterita walked in. "Why are you here, Joe?" Leo asked him. "It is because I have been experiencing the perfume of Padre Pio near me, and I am going to talk to Father Duggan about it," Joe replied.

One day when Leo was getting ready to visit Padre Pio, Angelina asked him to bring back a relic, something of Padre Pio's, for her to keep. When Leo was with Padre Pio in the dining room, he told him of Angelina's request. Padre Pio, who had a wonderful sense of humor, looked at the box of cereal that was in front of them. He took out one rice crispy. "Give this to Angelina," he said. Far from being disappointed, Angelina was very happy with the gift.

Once, on the spur of the moment, Leo and Joe decided to pay a surprise visit to Padre Pio. They asked Padre Paolino if he would like to go with them and he agreed. When they arrived, Padre Paolino told them to wait in the jeep for a moment while he went inside. He came out and told them to park in the barn behind the friary and next to the donkeys. Padre Paolino said to them that when he walked into the monastery, Padre Pio said, "Oh good, you have finally arrived. I have been expecting you and the two American soldiers all morning." They were learning that it was not so easy to surprise Padre Pio.

Leo began to have a strong desire to have a photograph taken of himself with Padre Pio. However, seeing how pressing Padre Pio's work schedule was and how people were constantly making requests of him, he did not have the heart to add to the burden. One day, without Leo being aware of it, someone took his picture sitting next to Padre Pio in the monastery. To Leo's great happiness, he was given the picture to keep.

Padre Pio invited Joe, Leo and Mario to come and see him on May 25, his 58th birthday. (The year was 1945.) Joe said, "We would love to come and see you on

your birthday and we will be there with bells on." Padre Pio wanted to know the meaning of the phrase, "with bells on." Joe said, "It means that we will be on time." Padre Pio understood then, and laughed at the expression.

For Padre Pio's birthday, Leo, Joe and Mario brought a beautiful sheet cake to the monastery with the words, "Happy Birthday, Padre Pio." That day, Padre Pio walked into the dining room, slightly limping. He had presided at the wedding ceremony for his niece earlier that day, and was exhausted. Leo noticed that Padre Pio enjoyed the conversation during lunch but did not eat one bite of food. Afterward, Leo, Joe and Mario sang "Happy Birthday" to Padre Pio, and at the end of the song, all of the Capuchins, including Padre Pio, broke into applause. Padre Pio had agreed to let Leo and his friends take photographs that day but he changed his mind. He explained to them that he was sorry, but he was too tired from the day's activities.

This was not the first time that Padre Pio had declined being photographed, and it would not be the last. Dr. Sanguinetti, one of the collaborators in the building of Padre Pio's hospital, the "Home for the Relief of Suffering," told of an incidence when Padre Pio asked that his photograph not be taken. Padre Pio and Dr. Sanguinetti were standing outside the "Home for the Relief of Suffering," when Dr. Sanguinetti took a photo of Padre Pio. Just at that moment a gust of wind blew the scarf that Padre Pio was wearing, across his face. When Padre Pio saw the camera, he said, "No, Doctor, no photographs please." Dr. Sanguinetti apologized to Padre Pio but could not resist the temptation. He stepped into the background and continued to take one picture after another until he had used two rolls of film. All of the photos came out blank except the first one with the scarf blowing across Padre Pio's face, the one he had taken before being forbidden.

After Padre Pio's birthday party, Leo, Joe and Mario stopped to talk to Father Ignatius in the monastery. They told him that when they returned to the U.S., they wanted to have something to remember Padre Pio by, a relic. They wanted Father Ignatius to obtain it for them. "What kind of a relic?" Father Ignatius asked. "A bandage that covered his stigmata," they replied. Father Ignatius turned as white as a sheet at the words. "What you are asking me to do is strictly forbidden," he said. "I could get into a lot of trouble. It is impossible." "No one will ever know," Leo responded. "We promise to keep the secret. It would mean so much to us." They finally convinced Father Ignatius and he returned a short time later with three bandages neatly tucked in his pocket. He looked frightened. "Now remember," said Father Ignatius, "do not say a word about this to anyone."

Not long afterward, Father Ignatius heard Padre Pio's booming voice summoning him. "Father Ignatius, come here at once," Padre Pio said. "You did something very wrong. You committed a theft. You know that you are not allowed to give the bandages to anyone, and you did it anyway."

And then he paused a moment and seemed to soften. "I forgive you, Father Ignatius," he said. "And I forgive

the boys, too. Tell them that I wore those bandages over my heart. Go in peace."

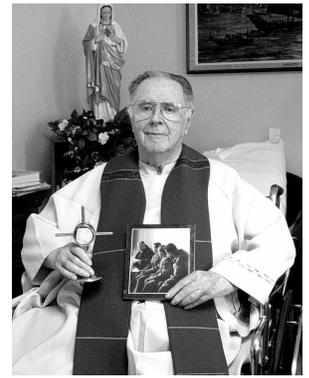
Many people who visited Padre Pio during the war years, asked him for information regarding their loved ones who were on the field of battle. Brother Ludovico, whose family was from San Giovanni Rotondo, was worried about his nephew, who was in the army but had not been heard from for a long time. Brother Ludovico's sister (the boy's mother) asked Padre Pio about her son. "He is all right but he cannot write to you. Don't worry, though, he will return home safely," Padre Pio told her. As it turned out, he had been taken prisoner by the Germans, but managed to escape and was hiding in the home of a kindly Italian family.

Capuchin Father, Padre Alberto D'Apolito, once asked Padre Pio his impressions about the war. "The war will last a long time," Padre Pio said. "We are still at the beginning. You will see it pass from town to town like an overflowing river, spreading its destruction, blood and death. May God help us." He was asked if San Giovanni Rotondo would be spared and he answered, "The Lord, in His infinite bounty, will spare this blessed place and all of the Gargano area." In fact, time proved the truth of his words. No bombs ever fell on San Giovanni Rotondo.

When the war was finally coming to an end, Joe, Mario and Leo got word of their new assignments. Leo learned that he would probably be stationed in Japan. Mario was going to be transferred to another part of Europe. Joe would be going back home to New York. A new military point system (Accumulated Service Record) had been put into place and Joe had enough points to be discharged.

They went to the monastery together one last time to tell Padre Pio the news and to say goodbye. "Points or no points," Padre Pio said, "I tell you that you will all be going home together." Mario told Padre Pio that he would come back again sometime to visit. "Do not do it," said Padre Pio. "Save your money instead. As your spiritual father, I will be with you always. Just call on me and I will be there." Mario, who had been greatly edified by his association with Padre Pio, and who, prior to meeting Padre Pio, did not have a deep faith life, became a daily communicant.

Joe asked Padre Pio if he thought he might have a vocation to the priesthood, perhaps the Trappist order. "Joe, you talk all the time," Padre Pio said. "You cannot keep silent even for a minute. You could never be a Trappist. Your vocation is to the married life." "But I do not know any girls," Joe said. "Well, if I have to, I will find a wife for you myself," Padre Pio answered. "How could you do that when you live in San Giovanni Rotondo and I will be in New York?" "Leave it to me,"



*Fr. Leo Fanning holding his relic and his photo with Padre Pio*

Padre Pio said. Joe soon met a very nice Italian girl and married her. To Leo, Padre Pio said, "You feel that you are to go to the altar of God. I do not want you to go anywhere else." He kissed the three men on each cheek following the Italian custom and gave each a handful of religious medals. When the men returned to the base, their transfer orders had been changed. They were all to go back to the United States.

Leo entered the seminary and was ordained at St. John's Cathedral in Paterson, New Jersey on May 30, 1954. Ten minutes before ordination, while waiting in the sacristy, a Western Union worker delivered a telegram to Leo. It said, "Congratulations on the day of your ordination." It was signed, "Padre Pio." Leo couldn't believe it. How did Padre Pio know the exact time and day of his ordination? And yet, that had been his experience with Padre Pio time and time again.

Father Leo has heard that many hotels, motels, restaurants, and souvenir shops have sprung up in the once small and isolated mountain village where Padre Pio lived for more than fifty years. A new and larger church had to be built to accommodate the pilgrims who now come by the thousands to pray at the tomb of Padre Pio. Indeed, there is now an entire "city of Padre Pio." Father Leo has not had the desire to return to San Giovanni Rotondo. He wants to remember it the way it was when he visited Padre Pio there - the simple and austere monastery, the quiet hills, the small rustic church, the silence, the rocky, expansive landscape, the peace. It is still vivid in his memory.

Father Leo's devotion to Padre Pio has continued through his priesthood. He organized a Padre Pio prayer group which he led for many years, and has given numerous talks on Padre Pio in various locations. Father Leo knows the great blessing he was given, that day more than 60 years ago when he drove his military jeep up the steep and winding road leading to Our Lady of Grace monastery in San Giovanni Rotondo. Many graces came to him that day and many graces have come to him since. Father Leo is now 84 years old. On May 30, 2007, he will have celebrated 53 years as a priest.

When we walked into the Catholic assisted living facility where Father Leo now resides, we found Father Leo in the chapel, celebrating Mass from his wheelchair, for the many residents that were gathered there. "You believe that you are to go to the altar of God," Padre Pio once told Leo. "I do not want you to go anywhere else." Father Leo did not go "anywhere else." He has dedicated his life to the service of God and to the Church. How proud Padre Pio must be of Father Leo Fanning.

#### **PADRE PIO DEVOTIONS**

Padre Pio Devotions are every 1st Monday of the month at Our Lady of the Rosary Catholic Church in San Diego. Rosary begins at 6:35 p.m. and Mass begins at 7:00 p.m. Benediction and prayers follow. For more information call (619) 697-5958.

*To receive more information about St. Pio and a copy of the prayers he said daily – send 3 stamps and your address to:*

**D. Allen • P.O. Box 191545 • San Diego, CA 92159**

Find Padre Pio information and newsletters online at [www.saintpio.org](http://www.saintpio.org)

## **Padre Pio's Words of Faith**

"Have great compassion for all pastors, preachers and guides of souls, and see how they are dispersed all over the world...pray to God for them, so that saving themselves they may obtain a fruitful salvation of souls. And I beg you not to ever forget me in this because God gives me a great will to never forget you before Him."

"Let us pray that peace may be restored to all the countries that are at war. But let us also pray for the souls that are involved in spiritual warfare that they may fight like strong ones."

"May the Lord confirm with His blessings, these wishes of mine, for your happiness is very close to my heart and I work and pray continuously for this end."



### **From our Spiritual Director**

I learned about one of Padre Pio's spiritual daughters, Maria, through two friends of mine who have become close to Maria through the years.

Maria was having a great many difficulties in her personal life. Things seemed to be getting worse. One day she picked up a holy card and looked intently at the picture. It was a prayer card of Padre Pio, whom she was not familiar with. "I do not know who you are," Maria prayed, "but if you are a saint, please help me." Shortly after that prayer, many of the difficult situations in her life improved, and a peace came into her heart. She learned that the saint on the prayer card was Padre Pio of San Giovanni Rotondo.

Maria decided to go to San Giovanni Rotondo to visit Padre Pio. She stayed at the home of Mary Pyle, Padre Pio's American secretary. It was a household full of activity and many visitors. One day Padre Pio said to one of his spiritual sons, "I want you to add another story to your home." "Why should I do that?" the man replied. "I do not need any more living space." "It will be for one of my spiritual daughters," Padre Pio replied. The man did as Padre Pio requested and Maria lived happily in the upper story of his home for many years.

Maria worked in the monastery of Our Lady of Grace as a housekeeper for many years. She cleaned the cells of the priests and brothers, did the laundry, and other household chores. One of the other housekeepers told Maria that sometimes when she washed Padre Pio's linens, the water had a beautiful fragrance of perfume. She did not want to throw the water away.

Once Maria was cleaning Padre Pio's cell and was dusting the crucifix in his room. She looked at her dust cloth and it was stained with blood. She showed it to one of the Capuchins who lived in the monastery. "You must give that to me, Maria," he said, and in obedience she gave it to him. Such relics were carefully protected. Maria who is still living, treasures her wonderful memories of being so close to her spiritual father for many years.

— Fr. Louis Solcia, CRSP