

Pray, Hope, and Don't Worry



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The Clergy Remembers Padre Pio - Part III

A note from the editors: We recently visited Msgr. John Esseff where he resides in Scranton, Pennsylvania. He shared with us his story of meeting Padre Pio in 1959.

Fr. John Esseff, while on a pilgrimage to Rome in 1959, decided to make a detour to San Giovanni Rotondo and visit Padre Pio. His friend on the pilgrimage, Fr. Robert was going to accompany him. As far as Fr. John knew, at that time, there were only two individuals living, who had the stigmata – Padre Pio who lived in Italy and Therese Neumann who lived in Germany. In 1959, Padre Pio was a controversial figure. Some people said that he had been banished from the priesthood, that his stigmata was self-inflicted, that he could no longer hear confessions. Others believed him to be a living saint, a man in touch with God. Fr. John was of the second opinion.

Fr. John had a small grasp of the Italian language and while in Rome, he was able to understand it to a limited degree. But when he left Rome for Padre Pio's monastery, all of that changed. He was not able to understand even one word of the Italian language that was being spoken. Someone was able to foresee the problem of the language barrier because he was given some helpful advice. When he and Fr. Robert arrived in San Giovanni Rotondo they were told simply to say the words, "Maria Pyla" to the first person they saw and they would be sure to be directed to the home of Mary Pyle. Mary Pyle was Padre Pio's American secretary and she offered hospitality to many visitors who came on pilgrimage to see Padre Pio.

When Fr. John and Fr. Robert stepped off the bus in San Giovanni Rotondo, the words "Maria Pyla" drew an instant response. They were directed to Mary's home, which was very close to Padre Pio's monastery. They received a warm welcome from Mary and she invited them to dinner. Padre Pio's nephew joined them for the meal.

As they were eating dinner, the front door opened and Padre Pio walked in. Needless to say, Fr. John was very surprised. Padre Pio looked directly at Fr. John and said, "Why are you here? Are you one of the curiosity seekers?" "No, not at all," said Fr. John. "I am a believer." Padre Pio walked over to the left side of the table where Fr. John was sitting and spoke to him for a few minutes. Then he turned and left. Fr. John was so surprised by the visit that he asked Mary about it. "Does Padre Pio come to your house often?" Mary understood that Fr. John had received a special



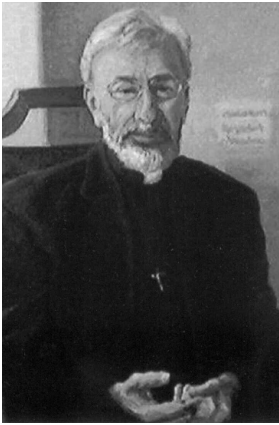
Many bishops from the Second Vatican Council visited Padre Pio

blessing and that the experience was meant for him and for no one else. Mary said to Fr. John, "Padre Pio had something special for you. He sometimes does that. None of the rest of us saw him."

Fr. John tried to take it all in. For those minutes when Padre Pio was talking to him, Fr. John was somehow not present to the others at the table. Mary Pyle understood and Padre Pio's nephew understood but Fr. Robert did not. He was completely mystified. "I find the whole experience that happened at dinner spooky," Fr. Robert said. "I don't know what to make of it."

The next morning, in order to get to Padre Pio's 5:00 a.m. Mass, the two priests got up in the middle of the night. They got to the church at 2:30 a.m., where a huge crowd was already gathered. When the doors opened, the two priests went into the sacristy. About 200 men were already assembled there. When Padre Pio walked through the sacristy, all of the men knelt down. Padre Pio stood right in front of Fr. John and in silence, stared at him. His expression was solemn, almost angry. Everyone looked at Padre Pio as he looked at Fr. John. This went on for what seemed like an hour but Fr. Robert told Fr. John that Padre Pio stared at him for about 15 minutes.

Padre Pio made his way with difficulty through the crowd, to a kneeler where he paused to pray before vesting for Mass. When he finished his prayers and passed through the sacristy again, he once more stopped in front of Fr. John. This time, however, he had a beautiful smile on his face. He had removed his gloves and Fr. John could see



*Oil Painting of
Msgr. John Esseff*

the stigmata. There was light passing through the wounds on his hands. The stigmata appeared transparent. Fr. John bent down and kissed his hand and then Padre Pio put his hand on Fr. John's head in a blessing.

The Mass of Padre Pio was an unforgettable experience. The church was filled to capacity and although his Mass was long, the time passed quickly. Fr. John noticed that after the Mass, the local Italian people took dabs of cotton and touched it to the floor by the altar. There were

bloodstains around the altar and it was gathered on the cotton as relics.

Fr. John wanted to make his confession to Padre Pio, but Padre Pio's assistant, Fr. Dominic Meyer told him it would not be possible. The confessions were booked solid for two weeks in advance. However, Fr. Dominic told Fr. John that he would speak to Padre Pio about him. A short time later, Fr. John received a letter from Fr. Dominic. Padre Pio had sent a message saying that if Fr. John ever needed his help while hearing confessions, to send his guardian angel to Padre Pio and he would help him immediately. Padre Pio added that if he needed help for any other reason, just to send his angel, and he would respond at once.

In the years since his visit to Padre Pio, Msgr. John Esseff has kept very busy in his priestly ministry. He has traveled worldwide and has given retreats to the Missionaries of Charity in Lebanon, Haiti, Italy, the U.S., India, and more. He was very close to Mother Teresa and while in India, he served as a confessor and retreat director to her and her religious community. He was appointed director of formation at the seminary in Fargo, North Dakota and at Creighton University he has served as spiritual director for formation of priests and seminarians. He is the creator of Telespond, a program which addresses the needs of the elderly and he has been an advocate for the handicapped, the retarded, the poor, the homeless, and the migrant farm workers. For 12 years he served at the Lackawanna County Prison as a counselor and chaplain to prisoners and their extended families. For his many contributions to humanity, he has received the Pope John Paul II award, "Prelate of Honor."

In June of 2007, Msgr. Esseff celebrated his 79th birthday. He has been a priest for 54 years. He continues to serve as a retreat master and spiritual director for bishops, priests, and seminarians. He has never forgotten Padre Pio's words, "Just send me your guardian angel if you ever need my help," words spoken almost 50 years ago. As a confessor and spiritual director, Msgr. John has needed Padre Pio's help and guidance on many, many occasions. Frequently, when faced with a difficult case, not knowing the right words to say or the best advice to give, he has sent his angel to Padre Pio. The answer has always come. He continues to send his guardian angel to Padre Pio and has felt Padre Pio's ever-present help through these many years.

Memories of Padre Pio

Fr. Joseph Anthony shared a close friendship with Padre Pio. Five years older than Padre Pio, Fr. Joseph Anthony lived side by side with Padre Pio at the monastery of Our Lady of Grace for four years. When Fr. Joseph Anthony was transferred to the monastery of St. Anne in Foggia, his health began to decline. On December 30, 1936, Padre Pio received the news that Fr. Joseph Anthony was gravely ill. His condition had grown steadily worse and he was close to death.

Padre Pio's prayers were requested. He lifted up his prayers to Heaven, begging God to come to the aide of his friend. What Padre Pio did not know was that Fr. Joseph Anthony had passed away on that very night. While Padre Pio was praying, he heard a knock at his door. When he opened the door, to his great surprise, there stood Fr. Joseph Anthony. "What are you doing here?" Padre Pio asked him. "I was told that you were in a great deal of pain and were gravely ill. I have been praying for you." "I am well," said Fr. Joseph Anthony. "All my pains have gone away and I have come to thank you for your prayers." Saying that, he vanished. It was then that Padre Pio understood that his friend had already passed away. When Padre Pio told the Capuchins about his experience, Fr. Raffaele suggested to him that he was probably dreaming. Padre Pio explained that it was not a dream. He was wide-awake and Fr. Joseph Anthony appeared at his door in flesh and blood. The friary records stated that Fr. Joseph Anthony had passed away at 2:00 a.m. That was the same time that he had visited Padre Pio.

Fr. Bernardo d'Alpicella had contracted malaria one summer, and even though he was receiving very good medical care, there was no improvement in his condition. Every two days, his fever would return. His doctor told him that it would be a good idea for him to have a change of climate. Perhaps his health would benefit from the change. Acting upon his doctor's advice, Fr. Bernardo decided to make a visit to San Giovanni Rotondo. However, his condition showed no improvement and the fever remained. One evening Father Bernardo was in the dining room with the friars and Padre Pio. He said, "Padre Pio, will you give me a blessing? I mean one of those strong ones!" The moment that Padre Pio blessed him, the fever disappeared.

Egidio Vagnozzi (1906-1980), a Catholic priest for 52 years, served as a Bishop for 31 years, the last 13 of those years, as a Cardinal. At one time he was designated Apostolic Nuncio to the Philippines, and it was at this assignment that Bishop Vagnozzi encountered many serious problems within the church. The responsibilities of his office and the complex issues he faced each day weighed on his mind. While in Rome, he spoke to the Holy Father, Pope Pius XII and asked for advice. Pope Pius XII encouraged Bishop Vagnozzi to visit Padre Pio in San Giovanni Rotondo and speak to him about the matter. The bishop found the advice hard to understand. Padre Pio never left his monastery and although not technically a cloistered monk, for all intents and purposes, he was. He

did not have any training in diplomatic matters. Living in the remote and isolated town of San Giovanni Rotondo, he was not in touch with the real world. How could he possibly offer Bishop Vagnozzi any advice?

After thinking it over, the bishop decided to make the trip. He did not tell anyone of his plan to visit Padre Pio as it was his desire to maintain a low profile. When he arrived in the small town of San Giovanni Rotondo, no one recognized him as a bishop. No one in this remote area in southern Italy had ever seen him before. At the monastery of Our Lady of Grace, upon meeting Padre Pio, Bishop Vagnozzi was very surprised to hear Padre Pio greet him with the words, "Hello, Your Excellency." He was shocked. How did Padre Pio know that he was a bishop?

The bishop confided to Padre Pio the many problems he faced as Apostolic Nuncio. With great kindness, Padre Pio said to him, "Your Excellency, you are the Apostolic Nuncio for the Philippines. Is that correct?" He answered, "Yes." "Who was it that sent you to the Philippines?" "It was the Holy Father who sent me," the bishop answered. "Well, who is the Holy Father?" The bishop replied, "The Holy Father is the Pope, the Vicar of Christ." Padre Pio said, "So then it was Our Lord Jesus Christ who sent you to serve the church in the Philippines. You are a representative of the Pope but you are also a representative of Jesus Christ. If Christ were to go to the Philippines and see all the problems and abuses that you have shared with me, what would He do? Whatever Christ would do, that is what you must do." The bishop returned to Rome and told Pope Pius XII what Padre Pio had said. The Holy Father told the bishop to take to heart the wise counsel that had been given to him. When he went back to the Philippines, he thought about Padre Pio's advice and acted upon it. Everything turned out very well.

Padre Pio's methods in the confessional sometimes seemed drastic, but they were effective. On occasion, Padre Pio applied a bit of "shock treatment," by sending the person out of the confessional without absolution. This acted as a wake up call for many. The young man in the following story received one such wake up call and it changed his life.

Father Mariano Paladino, one of the Capuchins in San Giovanni Rotondo, was approached on one occasion by a young man from the northern part of Italy. The young man confided to Father Mariano the many burdens that were in his heart. He was going through a particularly difficult religious crisis and many other problems were weighing on him. After listening, Padre Mariano suggested to the young man that he speak to Padre Pio.

Acting upon the advice, one day the young man went to confession to Padre Pio. But before he could utter even one word, Padre Pio said to him, "I want you to answer either yes or no to the questions that I ask you. Only that and no more." Padre Pio then began an examination of conscience. One by one, he named a list of serious sins, inquiring as to whether the young man had committed them or not. Much to his embarrassment, the young man had to answer yes to every sin that Padre Pio had named. After this humiliating experience, Padre Pio then told the

young man that he should leave the confessional, that is, without absolution. The young man was devastated and began to cry. He cried for three days.

But something impelled him to return to the monastery and so he did. He managed to position himself at a place where Padre Pio was passing by. As he was standing there, he perceived a wonderful fragrance of perfume. The young man assumed that Padre Pio was wearing after-shave cologne.

When he went back to his hotel, he saw a photograph of Padre Pio on the wall. The penetrating gaze of Padre Pio's eyes was so striking that the young man had to tightly close his own eyes. When he opened them, the photo had disappeared. He asked one of the employees at the hotel about the picture. He was informed that there had never been a picture of Padre Pio hanging on the wall. The young man then realized that Padre Pio's presence was with him and he began to deeply ponder the encounter he had with Padre Pio. After regaining his peace, he decided to go back to the monastery and visit Padre Pio once again. Again, he made his confession to Padre Pio and he spoke to him about his life's direction. The young man was able then to act on his desire. He became a Catholic priest.

In September 1955, **Padre Alberto D'Apolito** along with 45 others, made a pilgrimage to the shrine of Our Lady of Tears in Syracuse, Sicily. Padre Alberto invited Padre Pio to accompany them but he declined the invitation. He almost never left the monastery. "Go on ahead. I will stay in San Giovanni Rotondo but I will follow you," Padre Pio said. He meant that he would be praying for Padre Alberto and his companions while they were away.



On the way to the shrine, they drove through a large area of watermelon farms. In the warm September sunshine, the watermelons looked delicious and so the pilgrims asked the bus driver to stop. Unable to resist the temptation, the pilgrims ate too many of the watermelons. They began to suffer terribly from indigestion and nausea. Fortunately, they were all feeling better by the next day. They visited the beautiful shrine of Our Lady of Tears and then went on toward Palermo. Just as it was getting dark, on a lonely and desolate stretch of countryside, they came to an obstruction in the road. The bus driver stopped and told everyone to get out of the bus. The people became frightened and began to pray to Padre Pio. All at once, a wave of perfume filled the bus. When another wave of perfume passed through the bus, everyone understood that it was Padre Pio and that his presence was with them. They got out of the bus and began clearing away the fallen trees and rocks that were blocking the road. Just then, the Italian State police officers (the Carabinieri) arrived. They told the police officers that they had been praying for Padre Pio's protection. At the mention of Padre Pio's name, the police officers all removed their hats as a gesture of respect. "When you see Padre Pio again, please ask him to pray for us," they said. "As police officers, our lives are exposed to constant danger."

Padre Alberto received confirmation that Padre Pio had indeed been watching over them on their journey. As he entered the monastery, Padre Pio greeted him and said, "You all made fools out of yourselves with those water-melons!" And then he added, "And that night on the road to Palermo, you were all so frightened. What a scare!"



Padre Pietro Tartaglia left this very beautiful reminiscence of Padre Pio:

"I can see him today as he appeared to me when I was a youngster. It was beautiful to see him there in the silence of his cell when we Capuchin aspirants went to him for confession. The dim light gave a mystical touch to his emaciated but radiant countenance. Near him was a photograph of his mother who had died a short time before, and a little statue of Our Lady. He spoke about her to us and taught us to love

her. At a certain hour he used to walk in the friary garden, absorbed in his sufferings and his love while the beads slipped through the fingers of his wounded hands. And how full and ardent was his voice when he recited the Angelus with the others - in the garden, in the choir, or at the window. Who could fail to be moved by the sight of him as he walked with painful steps towards the altar for evening devotions and in a voice breaking with emotion recited the *Visit to Our Blessed Lady*."

Padre Pio had a great love for the religious habit. He lived in the time when the Capuchins had a habit they wore in the daytime and a night habit which they wore to bed. When Padre Pio became ill, the Superior of the monastery did not want him to wear his habit at night. However, Padre Pio was not in favor of any change in this regard. Only an order could convince him of it. So the Superior gave Padre Pio a dispensation from wearing the habit to bed, in favor of pajamas. Padre Pio started crying upon receiving the news. On the night that he died, September 23, 1968, knowing that his end was at hand, he went and put on his habit. He wanted to give his soul back to God, wearing his religious habit. The following story shows Padre Pio's deep respect for the habit:

One time when Padre Pio was hearing confessions in the sacristy of the church, he kept looking intently toward one particular man who was in the confessional line. The man noticed it and began to feel very uncomfortable. He moved to another place and tried to remain inconspicuous, but Padre Pio's penetrating eyes still followed him wherever he went. All of the people nearby noticed it as well and were quite curious as to why Padre Pio was staring at the man. Finally, Padre Pio motioned for the man to come over to him. The man thought there was some mistake and so he did not move. One of the men who was standing nearby told him, "Padre Pio is calling you. You must go to him." Although nervous, the man approached Padre Pio's confessional. In a soft voice, just above a whisper, Padre Pio said to him, "Father, go and put on your habit then come back and I will hear your confession."

The man was a Dominican priest. He had come to San Giovanni Rotondo because he had heard much talk about Padre Pio. It seems the opinion was evenly divided. Some people believed that Padre Pio was a living saint and others did not. The man wore civilian clothing because he wanted to find out for himself the truth about Padre Pio. His experience convinced him that Padre Pio was truly authentic.

There was a man in Rome who felt he might have a vocation to the priesthood. He made a trip to San Giovanni Rotondo to speak to Padre Pio about it. He was not certain if he wanted to be a diocesan priest or a religious order priest.

Padre Pio told the man to go back to Rome and pray to God for guidance. He assured him that he would pray as well. In Rome, the man spent many hours in prayer in front of the Blessed Sacrament. One day, to his great surprise, he saw two hands coming out of the tabernacle. They were holding a white habit with a red and blue cross on it. The habit was coming toward him. He rubbed his eyes to make sure he was not dreaming but it was not his imagination. Then the image disappeared.

He told his confessor about his experience and his confessor said that there was a religious order called the Trinitarians that wear a white habit with a blue and red cross. He was introduced to the Superior of the Trinitarians and saw that the habit the Superior was wearing was identical to what he had seen coming out of the tabernacle. Realizing that God had given him a clear sign, the man entered the Trinitarian order and took the name Pio. Upon ordination, Father Pio was sent to serve in a parish in Canada.

In 1927, Father Pio wrote a letter to the Vinciguerra family. He had stayed with them when he visited Padre Pio in San Giovanni Rotondo. The letter gave beautiful testimony to the fact that he was continuing to receive many graces from his spiritual father, Padre Pio. He attributed the fruitfulness of his ministry to Padre Pio's intercession. The letter said in part, "When I am beside the bed of a dying person who needs to be converted, or of a sick person who needs to be saved, I go in spirit to the little white church on the mountainside and kneel down at the feet of the humble Capuchin friar, and it is he who converts the dying sinner, and it is he who heals the sick person."

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 4 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