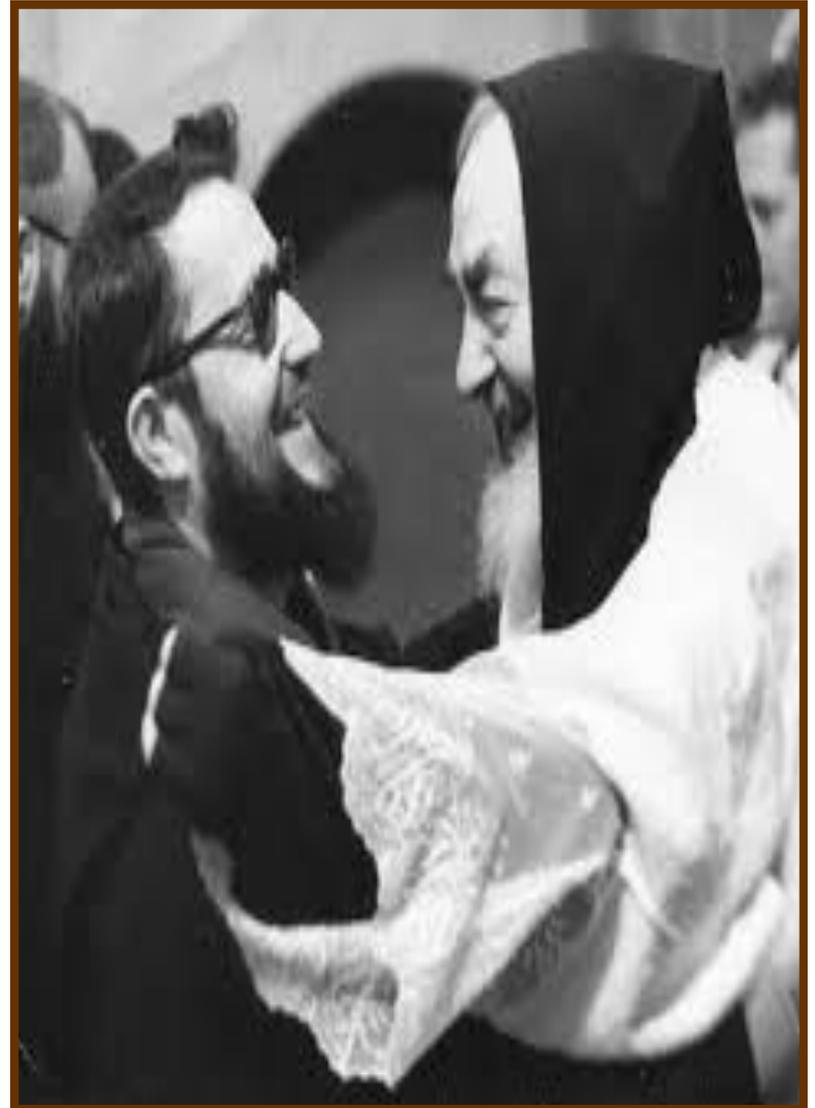


**Padre Pio
and
Love of Neighbor**



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Padre Pio and Love of Neighbor

by Most Rev. Paolo Carta, Bishop Emeritus of Foggia

"To oppose the barbarity of hatred and violence we proclaim the Civilization of Love." This is the solemn statement of Pope Paul VI. "Padre Pio and the Civilization of Love" was the theme of our first meditation, contemplating and admiring Padre Pio in the fundamental aspect of the Civilization of Love, or rather love for our Lord, in its threefold dimensions of love for the Person of Christ, for the Mother of Christ and for the Church of Christ.

Let us now meditate on the second aspect, the second requirement, the second characteristic, that of the Civilization of Love or love for the brethren.

It is the great commandment of fraternal charity given by Jesus, who said: "I give unto you: a new commandment that you love one another, as I have loved you. By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" - Jn 13, 34.

Saint John, Apostle and Evangelist, warns in his First Letter 4, 20: "If any man says I love God, and hates his brother; he is a liar.... And this commandment we have from God, that he who loves God, also loves his brother - if we love one another God abides in us, and his charity is perfected in us."

And Paul VI specified who the brother is that we must love, giving as motto for the Day of Peace 1971 "Every man is my brother."

Therefore the Civilization of Love is built on love for our Lord and love for neighbor. Padre Pio who was a sublime model of love for our Lord, was also a most shining example of love for the brethren and he put himself generously and heroically at their service to relieve their bodies and souls and save them.

The Home for the Relief of Suffering that was wanted by Padre Pio and built prodigiously by him is wonderful evidence.

And precisely because this work was inspired by evangelical charity for his neighbor, he had the noble and delicate thought of not wanting to call it a hospital or a clinic. He wanted to call it "home," because the home gives a sense of family, the home is the center where hearts are united in love where there is concern for everyone, but with preference for the suffering members. And he wanted to call it Home for the Relief to indicate the aim and the trust that the sick person would find comfort, relief, and a serene recuperation of physical and moral energy.

And he wanted to call it Home for the Relief of Suffering because the word suffering has a Christian sense and brings to mind the suffering of Christ in his Passion, in which



the sick person participates intimately, giving to his sufferings a high spiritual and supernatural value.

Built by offerings that came from all parts of the world; carried out with the most modern standards, equipped with all the equipment of advanced science and advanced technology, rich with the assistance of zealous Capuchin priests and an excellent order of nuns, Apostles of the Sacred Heart, the Home for the Relief of Suffering will sing for centuries of the immense love Padre Pio had for his brethren in need of health care and religious and moral assistance, in serene and welcoming surroundings animated by the charity of Christ.

To those who pointed out to him that the Home for the Relief of Suffering was too luxurious and refined, Padre Pio replied: "Too luxurious? But if it was possible I would make the Home in gold because the sick person is Jesus, and doing everything for our Lord is doing little."

Before the inauguration, the periodical The Home for the Relief of Suffering wrote: "The Home was born from an ideal of love: that is to contribute towards relieving the sufferings of the human being under the sign of Christian charity; the true, the only charity which takes no notice of the difference of caste or political party, of religion or race, of nobility and wealth. Uniting, in particular, the rich and the poor, abolishing every hateful difference of treatment. The poor man, the very poor man is our brother: we owe him the greatest consideration. Charity, in the Home, will be specially directed to the poor, without making him feel his poverty. It will be a gentle charity, not humiliating but fraternal."

The ideal of love, the Home requests that the doctors bear in mind this exhortation of Padre Pio's of 6 May 1956: "You have the mission of curing the sick; but if you don't bring love to the sickbed, I don't think the medicines will be of much use. I have experienced this: my doctor - when I was ill in 1916-17 - my doctor, when curing me, first of all gave me a word of comfort. Love cannot manage without words. How can you express it if not with words that relieve the sick person spiritually? Bring God to the patients, it will be of more worth than any other cure.

The Home for the Relief of Suffering was solemnly inaugurated on 5 May 1956, Padre Pio's name day. I was Bishop of Foggia at the time and I went to Amendola airport to meet Cardinal Giacomo Lercaro, who was to preside at the celebrations. During the speeches I was sitting next to Padre Pio and I admired his humility as his name was praised sky high. During the Cardinal's speech he said: "On Thursday, when the Bishop and the priests wash the feet of the twelve poor men, the following words are sung: where there is charity and love, there is God.' This morning the thought struck me



that this beautiful, clear sentence could be reversed: 'Where there is God, there is charity and love.' Where He passes, what He touches, where He comes... carries this note, this unmistakable seal of charity and love. Have you noticed this at San Giovanni Rotondo? Yes. The whole world has noticed it. Here God is; obviously there had to be charity and love!

That the Home for the Relief of Suffering was born of Padre Pio's love for the suffering brethren, glowed also from the words with which on that day he, Padre Pio, presented the work which caused universal admiration. Amongst other things, he said: "I thank the benefactors from all parts of the world who have co-operated. This is the creature that Providence, helped by you, has created. Admire it and together bless our Lord God. A seed has been placed on earth that He will warm with his rays of love. A new army made up of renunciations and love is about to arise to the glory of God for the comfort of souls and of infirm bodies."

On the first anniversary of the inauguration Padre Pio said to the benefactors: "May our Lord be praised. The Home for the Relief of Suffering has already opened its arms to several thousands of infirm bodies and spirits. God has warmed the deposited seed with his rays of love. From today we take up the second stage of the journey to be accomplished. The Home will have to increase the number of beds."

And the number of beds increased in his lifetime. And the number of beds increased after his death. And the number of beds is presently eight hundred and with the new wards this year there will be one thousand beds. (There are now 1,200.) In 1977 the sick admitted and cured have reached the number of 18,360; and from the opening of the Home - May 1956 to 31 December 1977 the patients who were admitted are exactly 306,785. Of this number not a few received medical care free of charge, because they were still without a medical scheme or old-age pensions.

A nun said to me: "But who can count the sick of soul who came to this hospital and went back to their families reconciled with our Lord and sincerely convinced and determined to stay in his grace? The Home of Padre Pio is always available and has open arms at all hours and for every necessity of suffering bodies and souls. The Home has been created for them and we are here for them always available with a heart bigger than the sea, following in the Padre's footsteps, ready to give even our lives to save the Home that is under such attack."

At this point it is no longer home but city. And it is a city where the Civilization of Love triumphs.

But Padre Pio's contribution to the Civilization of Love is even more abundant and generous in the heroic service of giving relief to souls.

The influx of the sick in body is impressive at San Giovanni Rotondo. Far more intense is the rush of the sick of soul.

Victim in his lifetime, Padre Pio accepted death as a victim in complete clearness of mind, gently repeating the Names of Jesus and Mary. He died in the middle of the night, at 2.30 on 23 September 1968.

"Consummatum est!" It is finished!

Padre Pio has therefore written luminous pages in the story of the Church of the Civilization of Love with his love for our Lord and his love for his neighbor.

And to his spiritual children and whoever visits his tomb, he repeats with his example, the message, the invitation, the exhortation to be in the world witnesses and carriers of the Civilization of Love that has for a foundation the evangelical command of charity, for a source, the Heart of Christ, for a scene, the actions of the whole world, and for a conclusion the triumph of love in unending centuries in Paradise. You also must receive this message of holy love with open hearts. Keep it in your heart as the spiritual fruit of your pilgrimage to Padre Pio's tomb. Spread it around you, in your families, in the world of work, in the schools, in social life and together with me address him this supplication with all your hearts.

Dearest Padre, we are happy to have come here on a visit with a spirit of faith and love.

We were moved at your tomb, we have admired this stupendous shrine built by you to the glory of Our Lady of Grace, we have devoutly followed the Way of the Cross placed on the mountain and we have rejoiced in contemplating the Home for the Relief of Suffering.

In a little while we will be leaving. But a part of our heart remains here with you. For the rest of our lives we will remember the days we spent here with you as days of grace, of blessings, of holy joy. We will speak of you to those we meet and we will exhort them also to come to you. We will carry your message of love to everyone.

But you, dear Padre Pio, pray for each one of us, for our personal sanctification, for our eternal salvation, for our families, for the sick, the children, the youth and the elderly.

Pray for our country so that hatred is extinguished, violence ends, fraternal love flourishes, the fruitful collaboration between social classes comes about and days of prosperity and serenity arise especially for the poor.

Pray above all for the Church, so that it accomplishes its mission of evangelization and promotes humanity for the advent of the Civilization of Love!

"My son, I need victims to calm my Father's just divine anger; renew the sacrifice of your whole self and do so without any reserve." And Padre Pio writes: "I have renewed the sacrifice of my life" (Letters I).

Padre Agostino encourages him like this:

"I know that you once offered yourself as a victim for sinners. Jesus accepted your offering and He has given you the grace to bear the sacrifice entailed. So have courage a little longer, for the reward is not far off" (Letters I).

He receives encouragement even from Heaven. Here are his words:

"Jesus, his beloved Mother... continue to encourage me and they keep on repeating that a victim properly so-called must lose all his blood" (Letters I).

"Did I not tell you that Jesus wants me to suffer without any consolation? Has He not asked me and chosen me to be one of his victims? Our most sweet Jesus has really made me understand the full significance of being a victim.

"It is necessary to reach the 'Consummatum est' (it is finished) and 'In manus tuas' (into your hands)" (Letters I).

After he had received the stigmata he always appeared as someone bent under a heavy weight. There was someone who pointed it out to him saying: "Padre, you suffer so much, why did you have the imprudence to offer yourself as a victim for all humanity. You, Padre, carry the Church on one shoulder and on the other the corrupt world convulsed by evil." He replied: "Pray that I will not be squashed."

And on another day to someone who asked him how much he suffered, he replied: "As much as one can suffer who has taken the burden of all humanity. Pray for the one who carries the weight of everyone! Everyone's cross!"

Padre Mondrone of La Civiltà Cattolica commented: "Like Jesus he went about stooped and with great difficulty, from one fall to another, under the weight of the cross, of course, also because of his physical condition horribly tortured and bleeding. But tired above all because 'supra dorsum meum fabricaverunt peccatores' (the sinners ploughed my back)".

That back was loaded with the sins of the whole world from the first to the last, because they all had to be atoned for as everyone had offended God's Majesty. This was the real and most unbearable weight carried by Jesus' victim. In this way he lived his mission of Cyrenean for everyone, crushed by the sins of the world, in the confessional, crushed by the sins of the world at the altar. An abundance of grace flowed from Padre Pio's bleeding hands: from the hand that absolved in the confessional from the hand that offered bread and wine at the altar.

They came from all parts of the world. They waited days and days for their turn, for their moment of grace and blessing: it was the moment of their confession to Padre Pio. After which they left happy, to tell everyone of the privilege they had received and to keep in their hearts all their lives the memory of the Padre's words sealed in Confession. Never can I forget the holy words he told me the first time I confessed to him, exactly fifteen days after my solemn entrance to Foggia as Bishop. Words of encouragement that went to the bottom of my heart and accompanied me for all of my twenty three years as Bishop, seven in Foggia, sixteen at Sassari with Apostolic Administration of also two other dioceses, Alghero and Ozieri.

And that is the other marvelous aspect under which his figure emerges gigantically before us, Padre Pio the confessor. Or rather, Padre Pio martyr of the confessional.

I am a witness of what happened here around him. Every time I came here I saw a crowd famished for that divine grace that purifies souls, sanctifies and raises them up and rejoices them by virtue of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. And I have seen Padre Pio looking at that crowd moved with the same sentiments that animated the Heart of Jesus when He said: I feel pity for this crowd." And I have seen him tired, worn out, languishing and continuing to hear confessions for hours and hours from morning to night, men and women, the sick and the healthy, the rich and the poor, priests and laymen, coming from far and wide.

At the end of a day in the confessional, he wrote: "My work is always assiduous. And it is now one o'clock after midnight that I write these few lines. It is now nineteen hours that I have been working continually. Never mind!"

And he exercised the ministry of confession for the duration of fifty-eight years!

As far as I know in the story of the Church he has probably beaten all the records of resistance in the confessional. In the Cause for the recognition of the heroism of his virtues for his beatification and canonization, this is certainly his major title of glory, this is the test of his sanctity, this is the most brilliant example that he has left for priests in the whole world in this present century and for centuries to come.

How can this heroism be explained? With love. With love for neighbor. Like Saint Paul, Padre Pio could say: "For the charity of Christ presseth us" 2 Cor 5,14.

In his letters we find splendid traces of this love for Christ that drove him to sacrifice himself, to give himself, for the good of the brethren and the relief of souls.

For our mutual edification, I extract some passages of various letters to his Spiritual Director.

"I am consumed with love for God and love for my neighbor."

"I am rapidly transported to live for my neighbor."

"I have worked, I want to work. I have prayed, I want to pray; I have wept and I want to weep always for my brothers in exile."

"I love souls as I love God."

"You must know that I do not have a free moment: a crowd of souls thirsting for Jesus fall upon me so that I don't know which way to turn. Before such an abundant harvest, on one hand I rejoice in the Lord, because I see the ranks of elect souls always increasing and Jesus loved more; and on the other hand I feel broken by such a weight."

"There have been periods when I heard confessions, without interruption for eighteen hours consecutively."

"I am overloaded with work, because I hear confessions all day and often at night hundreds of thousands of people. I don't have a moment to myself. But God helps me effectively in my ministry."

"I feel the strength to renounce everything, so long as souls return to Jesus and love Jesus."

Sometimes he treated penitents severely, but they were superficial, hypocritical penitents.

He sometimes refused to give absolution but he did this because he did not tolerate perseverance in evil, and because with the gift of scrutiny of hearts, he saw clearly in consciences and discovered the bad dispositions.

There was also a sin, the gravity of which made Padre Pio let fly, obliging him to condemn inexorably: the sin against maternity, the malicious limitation of children. This was a crime - a crime against life at its source - which he felt atrociously; he who had given his own life as a complete gift to our Lord.

In the biographies of Padre Pio we read of extraordinary happenings such as miraculous cures, and the mysterious perfumes that many perceived, from the day he received the stigmata to the day of his death. There is talk also of bilocation's, that is to find oneself in two different and distant places at once. In this way General

Cadorna, Supreme Commander of the Italian Army replaced after the defeat of Caporetto by General Diaz, in a moment of dejection, saw in front of him a friar, with bleeding hands and a gentle expression. On going to San Giovanni Rotondo he recognized Padre Pio in that friar.

In this way the well-known actor Carlo Campanini, spiritual son of Padre Pio, stated that he had seen him one day entering his house in Rome.

But quite frankly I have never given much importance to these phenomena. For me the phenomenon number one is the downright miracle of his love for the brethren manifested above all by superhuman resistance in the confessional for the relief of souls.

In my opinion, the supreme and sublime manifestation of Padre Pio's love for his brethren is constituted by his offering of himself as a victim for the conversion of sinners and the salvation of humanity.

The offering of a victim signifies offering himself to God with a full and perfect disposition of accepting any suffering and even death to obtain extraordinary graces.

On 29 November 1910, he wrote to his Spiritual Father:

"I want to ask your permission for something. For some time past I have felt the need to offer myself to the Lord as a victim for poor sinners and for the souls in Purgatory. This desire has been growing continually in my heart so that it has now become what I would call a strong passion, I have in fact made this offering to the Lord several times, beseeching to pour out, upon me the punishments prepared for sinners and for the souls in a state of purgation, even increasing them a hundredfold for me, as long as He converts and saves sinners and quickly admits to paradise the souls in Purgatory; but I should now like to make this offering to the Lord in obedience to you. It seems to me that Jesus really wants this. I am sure that you will have no difficulty in granting me this permission" (Letters I).

On December 1910 Padre Benedetto replied:

"Make the offering of which you speak of and it will be most acceptable to the Lord. Extend your own arms also on your cross and by offering to the Father the sacrifice of yourself in union with our most loving Savior suffer, groan and pray for the wicked of the earth and for the poor souls in the next life who are so deserving of our compassion in their patient and unspeakable sufferings" (Letters I).

In an apparition of 12 March 1913, Jesus speaks and complains of the ingratitude of men and adds: