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Padre Pio and Erminia Gargani



**“Good daughter it is not abandonment but love that
the most sweet Savior is showing you”**

Padre Pio

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by Marianna lafelice

The role expected of women in Italy at the beginning of the 20th century and especially in southern Italy, was that of wife and mother and with all the emotional and religious ties and duties that go with it, which the men were too occupied in the hard work of the land and in the pursuit of social and economical realization had no time for. So a woman who chose to live outside of these traditional parameters was seen as breaking, almost "transgressing" convention. Erminia Gargani because she also worked and was independent was considered to be in many respects "transgressive."

Erminia moreover, grew up in a family in which the women had character. Erminia, although the of sister Mother Maria Gatgani, a woman of strong faith and will, she was not overshadowed by this sister, who even in her gentleness was imposing and could have relegated her to a role of secondary status. Erminia knew how to always be herself, that is she knew how to "start again," to "rethink" her life, especially after the terrible tragedy that was reserved for her.

Erminia was a schoolteacher and had studied at the Avellino Teachers College. When she received her diploma she was assigned a post at a school in Casalnuovo Monterotaro, a small town in the province of Foggia, where she lived for 19 years and where her family in many ways would change forever.

Committed totally to her work, Erminia almost at once would be challenged by the hardships of life. In fact, her first classes consisted of undisciplined children totally incapable of following the school rules. But, she was not discouraged and began to look for the good side in them: she stimulated their interests, treated them with respect and little by little she won them over and they began to obey the regulations, greet her when she entered the classroom, and even start the day with a prayer to Jesus. But here at Casalnuovo, Erminia would leave a part of herself.

Nine years later, she would peacefully give up her soul and join forever her Carlo, whom she had continued to love her whole life with her pure love.

As the author of this story states "We women, it is a known fact, are made in this way. We are capable of loving the reminiscence of an impossible love for always. On these loves it will never be possible to write the last word."

- 5.) Do not be surprised at all by your weaknesses recognizing yourself for what you are, blushing at your constancies than infidelities to God, and place your trust in the heavenly Father, abandoning yourself in His arms like a child in the arms of its mother.
- 6.) Never take pride in your virtues, reminding yourself often that everything comes from God, to whom we must give honor and glory" (Letters III).

These goals are not something easy to attain and because of this Padre Pio would remain close to Erminia and continue writing to her: "When you are able to take big steps on the path along which God leads you, patiently wait until your legs are strong enough to run, or rather, until you have the wings to fly. Be content for now, my good daughter, with being a little honeybee, which will soon become a big bee capable of producing honey" (Letters III).

This image of the busy honeybee is the symbol of that patient waiting that Erminia would have to achieve in herself. She would "work" hard on herself, perfecting her faith that would continue to grow her whole life, spent in teaching and instructing the catechism. She gave thanks to Padre Pio for making her understand something very important, that her life after Carlo's death, was not barren and unproductive. Even though she renounced forever matrimony, and by that motherhood in a biological sense, in dedicating her life to teaching, she considered this her mission, and would become a mother, a second mother, to generations of students.

In this mission, morality would prevail over the intellectual, even though the intellectual remained always very important.

On 4 May 1953, Donna Erminia as she is still remembered in her hometown of Morra Inpinia, was awarded by the President of the Republic, Luigi Einaudi, for her 40 years of teaching in elementary schools, a gold medallion.

It was here that her "womanhood" would undergo a sharp and painful trial; it was here in fact, where she lived her love story with Carlo Agnusdei, a well brought up young man from a distinguished and wealthy family. It was a courtship very different to what we have become accustomed to today. It was a romantic wholesome love expressed in an atmosphere of reserve, of amorous sentiments and much through words. But in that period of time when this love was born, it was the mother of the family who was responsible for the children's' education and the arrangement of their marriages, especially of the male offspring. And in this story too, in keeping with the most traditional of clichés, the love of Erminia and Carlo would be obstructed by the family of the husband to be, with the mother in the front lines preventing her son from marrying "beneath himself."

Carlo's parents out to "protect" what Pierre Bourdieu has termed the "symbolic capital" of the family, the family name rather than the patrimony, failed to recognize in Erminia her great emotional, psychological and spiritual worth and she, in turn, her head held high, would not accept a marriage without the complete approval of the fiancé's family. Erminia had no wish to enter an emotional relationship that would go against her future in-laws and nor did she wish to embitter the relations between Carlo and his parents, and because of this she refused to marry. With dignity she got herself out of this sterile entanglement, the result of complicated and distressing family relations, knowing that she would never be able to "build" a marriage on the "ruins" of a parent-son relationship.

But as resolute as Erminia was in her decision, Carlo could not comprehend her feelings and, perhaps from extreme personal suffering, or because he lacked the same faith and strength of Erminia, he took his life with poison. His suicide was a cry of desperation over this failed relationship between his parents and Erminia.

Erminia was never able to recover from the tragedy, although with Padre Pio's help, who in this difficult moment would come into her life, she would little by little be able to come to terms with it. She was heartbroken over Carlo's suicide and at first decided to join a religious order of nuns, the Sacramentine Sisters at Casoria, but this decision would cause great grief and disagreements in her family. Her sister Maria wrote to Padre Pio seeking his advice and he wrote back to her: "If your parents are absolutely determined to take your sister from the cloister by force... then it would be better, for civility, to persuade your sister to return, leaving her re-entry into the Order for a better time" (S.G. Rotondo, 24 September 1916).

Erminia would leave the convent and go back to teaching, and, from that moment on, begin a busy apostolate in her parish teaching catechism, in which she would receive encouragement from Padre Pio through an ardent correspondence of a total of 69 letters, now part of Volume III of Padre Pio's writings.

Padre Pio welcomed Erminia among his spiritual daughters in a very distressing time of her life, and instead of advising her to leave the world, he directed and guided her in the world.

In a letter to his "good daughter," as he often called her, he explained: "It is not abandonment but love that the most sweet Savior is showing you. It is not at all true that you offend God in that state of aridity and desolation of spirit in which the loving Savior has placed you, because His vigilant grace greatly protects you from such an offense" (Letters III). Padre Pio writing to Erminia would teach and explain the faith to her in relation to the spiritual situation of her life. Only eight days later, knowing very well the loneliness Erminia was experiencing, he wrote again: "I write immediately, because I believe Jesus wants to comfort you through this poor writing of mine" (Letters III).

Little by little Erminia would come to feel that she could confide in Padre Pio and she told him about the terrible confusion and darkness she was experiencing. Padre Pio, spoke to her using the imagery of a cloud, a symbol of the "unknowable" God: "The deeper the darkness grows, the closer God is. Remember this great truth, my beloved

daughter, and be comforted by it. That a cloud covered the 'Sancta Sanctorum' every time the Lord wanted to warn His chosen people of His presence" (Letters III).

Padre Pio's knowledge of Scripture was not the speculative and disinterested knowledge of a scholar. As a true Franciscan, Scripture had become a second nature to him. He thought and understood in a biblical way and it was part of his everyday speech.

Padre Pio did not cease to calm Erminia and to encourage her in the faith: "Come on! Keep strongly and constantly united to God, consecrating all your affections, torments and your entire self to Him, patiently awaiting the return of that beautiful sun, whenever the Spouse is pleased to visit you through trials or aridity, desolation and darkness of spirit" (Letters III). Words like these we find continuously in his letters to her.

Padre Pio stressed to Erminia, in particular, the virtue of humility on the road to perfection. In his letter dated 15 February 1918, he wrote: "To begin with, you must insist on the root and foundation of Christian justice and goodness; on that virtue, that has been clearly offered to us as an example to follow, and by that I mean humility; an interior and exterior humility, but more interior than exterior, more felt than shown, more profound than visible" (Letters III).

It is in this letter that he indicates to her six rules to attain this goal:

- "1.) Never be satisfied with yourself.
- 2.) Never complain about offenses wherever they might come from.
- 3.) Forgive everyone in Christian charity.
- 4.) Always lament your wretchedness before God.