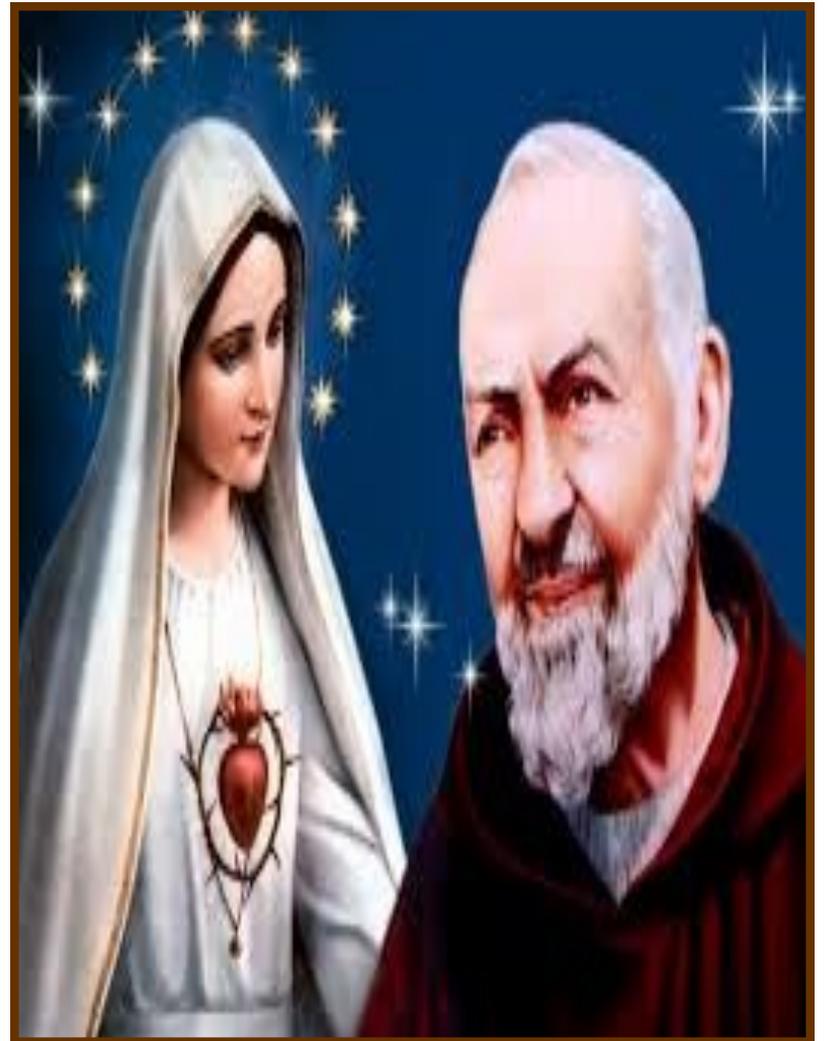




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# Padre Pio and the Immaculate Heart of Mary

by Most Rev. Paola Carta, Bishop Emeritus of Foggia

When I spoke on the theme: "How I saw Padre Pio during my seven years as Bishop of Foggia from 1955 to 1962," I presented Padre Pio's spirituality as "A man of God who prays—absolves—suffers—offers."

Invited again by the Capuchin Friars, custodians of the tomb which is the destination of pilgrims from all the corners of the world, I am most happy to celebrate today and tomorrow the Mass with you and for you, my very dear brethren, inviting you to meditate with me on two other fundamental aspects of the spirituality of Padre Pio. Today Padre Pio and the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Tomorrow, God willing, Padre Pio and the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

I wish to consider Padre Pio in the light of the Immaculate Heart of Mary as our Lady revealed it to the three children of Fatima. Having meditated on the personality, spirituality and work of Padre Pio in connection with the most Sacred Heart of Jesus, let us try to penetrate as far as possible with the grace of the Holy Spirit into that marvelous world of the spirit where Padre Pio's heart appears in full harmony with the heart of our Heavenly Mother. For our mutual edification we will meditate on the love and trust Padre Pio placed in Mary Most Holy, on his personal reply to the message of Fatima and on the visit of Our Lady of Fatima to Padre Pio, concluding, as we did yesterday with a confidential talk with the Padre.

## I - Love and trust of Padre Pio for our Lady

To understand the love and trust Padre Pio had for our Lady, it would be enough to tell you, my very dear brethren, to look around you! This splendid shrine is a hymn, a poem which sings and praises Padre Pio's devotion to Mary Most Holy! Each stone of this magnificent temple will repeat his name in centuries to come! He wanted this shrine! He succeeded in its incredible realization! People from all parts of the world replied to his moved and moving call for necessary funds to erect this palace to the Queen of Heaven and Earth, honored as Our Lady of Grace! And permit me to remind you of Padre Pio's joy on the day - 1 July 1959 - when, according to his wishes, I had the honor and immense joy of consecrating this church with a solemn rite which lasted exactly four hours!

But apart from this, the whole of Padre Pio's life was lit up with the gentle light of our Lady.

## Conversing with the Padre

Allow me to conclude this meditation with a confidential talk with the Padre.

Beloved Padre Pio, I remember an episode that took place one day during a civil war. On the facade of a church someone had written in large letters this appeal: "Fratelli, armatevi!" (Brothers, arm yourselves!). A woman, a mother who had gone to church to pray fervently for peace, saw that writing, was profoundly struck and afflicted. Then she had a bright and marvelous idea. She went up to the word "armatevi" (arm yourselves) and cancelled the letter R. And the appeal was transformed. No longer: "Fratelli, armatevi" but Fratelli amatevi!" (Brothers love each other).

Beloved Padre you know that today in Italy there are those who spread in various ways this fratricidal appeal: "Fratelli, armatevi." And in fact how many young men belong to armed groups, how many go around with weapons ready to shoot! And how many acts of violence, how many murders have stained with blood the streets of Italy in these last years! And how many mothers in tears, how many brides, widows, how many orphaned children.

Dear Padre Pio, listen to me. Now that you contemplate our Lady in the brightness of her celestial beauty, you who see her sitting at the right side of her Son, who refuses her nothing, pray to her so that she intervenes with her Immaculate Heart, with her Mother's Heart and from the word "armatevi" cancel the R so that the cry "Fratelli, amatevi, amatevi!" is taken up by all and echoes from one end of Italy to the other.

Yes, dear Padre, I recommended the whole world to you for the triumph of the Civilization of Love. Today I ask for the salvation of Italy in particular, in this grave hour of its history. You who have so loved and honored it with the splendour of your sanctity, see to it that Italy faithfully fulfils the mission given it by Divine Providence of announcing from Rome the message of the Gospel of Christ, from Assisi the Franciscan message of Peace and Good and from San Giovanni Rotondo your message of love for our Lady!



During the morning of 6 August, the Padre was able to go down to the church. He stopped in front of the statue of our Lady — but had to sit down because he was exhausted — and he gave her a gold rosary. The statue was lowered before his face and he was able to kiss her. It was a most affectionate gesture.

Between two and three in the afternoon of 6 August the helicopter carrying the statue of our Lady rose from the terrace of the Home for Relief of Suffering headed for Sicily. It did three turns over the crowd gathered on the square in front of the church and flew away.

From a window Padre Pio watched the helicopter fly away with eyes filled with tears. To our Lady in flight Padre Pio lamented with a confidence that was all his own: "My Lady, my Mother, you came to Italy and I got sick, now you are going away and you leave me still ill."

At that instant he felt a shudder in all his person. As long as he lived he repeated. "In that very instant I felt a sort of shudder in my bones which cured me immediately." His Spiritual Father confirmed it saying: "In a moment the Padre felt a mysterious force in his body and said to his confreres: 'I am cured'." He was healthy and strong as never before in his life.

Informed about an article that appeared in Foggia, which asked why Our Lady of Fatima had gone to San Giovanni Rotondo and not the shrine of Saint Michael at Monte Sant' Angelo, Padre Pio explained with enchanting simplicity: "Our Lady came here because she wanted to cure Padre Pio."

I like to add that she also came because the example of Padre Pio's ardent devotion and his prodigious recovery would rouse in Italy and the world a fervent increase of love and confidence towards the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

And from this marvelous episode we must make a holy resolution to grow always in this devotion with a generous reply to the message of Fatima, reciting fervently the Rosary every day, praying and offering our sufferings for the conversion of sinners, receiving Communion on the first Saturdays of the month in the hope that the consoling words will come true for us: "I promise salvation to all those who practice devotion to my Immaculate Heart. These souls will be most dear to God, and like flowers I will place them before his throne." Like this we can even look to the future of the Church and humanity with serenity, trustful in the prophetic word of Mary who in her third apparition of 13 July 1917 announced: "In the end, my Immaculate Heart will triumph."

In a letter of 6 May 1913, he gives vent to a delicate filial gentleness, writing: "Here we are at last in the month of our beautiful Mother once again.... This dear Mother continues to lavish her maternal care upon me, especially during the present month. She takes care of me to an exceeding degree.... I am all aflame although there is no fire. I feel myself held fast and bound to the Son by means of this Mother.... I'd like to fly off to invite all creatures to love Jesus and Mary."

The Council and Pope Paul VI proclaimed and acclaimed Mary as Mother of the Church and Padre Pio will continue to repeat for centuries to the faithful who flock here from all the Churches scattered in the world that they must grow in the love of the Mother of the Church.

## II - Reply to the message of Fatima

To be our Advocate, our Help, our Mediatrix, our Sign of certain hope and consolation our Lady wanted to manifest her Immaculate Heart to the world. She appeared to three children at Fatima, exactly 80 years ago. It is a beautiful story. It is a story, not a legend. This was confirmed by the pilgrimage of Paul VI, years ago, for the fiftieth anniversary of the apparitions, with the participation of an immense crowd and Lucia, the survivor of the three small seers, still alive today, a nun in the Convent of Saint Teresa at Coimbra in Portugal with the name of Sister Lucia of the Immaculate Heart.

At Fatima our Lady gave a message, a message from Heaven, a message of salvation, that is included in the story of salvation as a new divine intervention of salvation. The summary is contained in these precise words heard by the three children during the apparitions from May to October 1917: "You have seen hell where the souls of poor sinners go. To save them our Lord wants to establish in the world devotion to my Immaculate Heart. Pray a lot and make sacrifices for sinners. Take note that many souls go to hell because there is no one who prays or makes sacrifices for them. Do you wish to offer yourselves to God, ready to accept all the sufferings He wishes to send you in reparation for the sins with which He is offended and to obtain the conversion of sinners? Say the Rosary every day. The most holy Hearts of Jesus and Mary listen to your petitions."



This message of Fatima called for a reply on behalf of the whole church; a reply of prayer and sacrifice, animated also with a spirit of reparation for sins.

### III - Our Lady of Fatima visits Padre Pio

I think I can assert that in the half century which followed, no one in the Church has given a more complete reply than Padre Pio. The maternal anxiety of the Immaculate Heart of Mary for the souls going to hell had profoundly and completely invaded the heart of Padre Pio, who made of his whole life a great sacrifice to our Lord to snatch souls away from eternal damnation.

*1. Our Lady of Fatima asked especially for the prayer of the Rosary. And who could count the hours Padre Pio spent in prayer for the conversion and salvation of sinners? And who more than he held the rosary in his hand, night and day, filling all the free moments of the day with the most devout recital of the Rosary? And with how much loving insistence did he not recommend the Rosary to everyone as a means of salvation!*

One day one of his penitents said to him: "Padre, today they say the Rosary is out of date, that it is no longer in fashion. It is no longer said in many churches." He replied: "Let us do what our fathers did and all will be well with us." "But Satan rules the world." Padre Pio replied: "Because they make him rule; can a spirit rule by itself if it is not united to the human will? We could not have been born in a more depraved world. The one who prays a lot saves himself. The one who prays little is in danger. The one who does not pray loses his soul."

"Padre, say something to us."

"Love our Lady, make others love her. Always say your Rosary and say it well. Satan always tries to destroy this prayer, but he will never succeed. It is the prayer of her who triumphs over everything and everyone."

And two days before he died, he repeated: "Love our Lady and make her loved. Recite the Rosary and recite it always. And recite it as much as you can."

*2. Our Lady of Fatima also asked for sacrifices, acts of mortification, penances and sufferings accepted or spontaneously embraced to save souls from hell.*

How well did our dear Padre Pio understand this need! In fact he said: "Souls are not given as gifts; they are bought. You do not know what they cost Jesus. Now they still have to be bought always with the same coin."

And Padre Pio paid and bought souls at a most high price: with heroic penance, with food, with sleep, with rest, with the martyrdom of fifty-eight years in the ministry of confession; with sufferings derived from misunderstandings and prohibitions and serious disciplinary measures taken against him at various times of his life, through no fault of his; with enormous difficulties to overcome to build the Home for the Relief of Suffering; and above all with the crucifixion which lasted exactly half a century with open wounds. A victim completely sacrificed for sinners. And that was Padre Pio's reply to the message of Fatima.

This heroic reply of Padre Pio's deserved a sign of maternal pleasure from our Lady. And the sign was marvelous.

Towards the end of April 1959 a statue of the Immaculate Heart of Mary that had come specially from Fatima was traveling all over Italy by helicopter, stopping at the provincial capitals. But San Giovanni Rotondo is not a provincial capital, and on the other hand, Padre Pio could not go to Foggia where at that time I was bishop of that dear and beautiful diocese and had prepared a triumphal reception for the traveling Madonna. Amongst other things he could not come because just when the statue arrived in Italy, Padre Pio was struck down by a bad attack of pleurisy, that made it impossible for him to even celebrate Mass from 5 May onwards. And the illness continued so that he was still prostrate when our Lady arrived in Puglia.



But could the Mother with an Immaculate Heart so sensitive and delicate not visit her dearest son, Padre Pio? And the extraordinary exception, the change of schedule was granted!

The arrival of the Marian statue was fixed for 5 August. The people had to be prepared to receive our Lady with great fervor, with immense joy, with filial love and abundant spiritual fruits. And it was Padre Pio who from his sick bed spoke with a loud speaker to the faithful gathered in the church for a novena.

I now give some edifying particulars from a biography of Padre Pio.

On 27 July Padre Pio announced the beginning of the novena "for the visit the Heavenly Mother wants to make" and he exhorted to prepare for it with Christian renewal. Every evening he reminded them of the joy, the good fortune, the "very special grace" of this visit and the obligation of a worthy welcome above all with the practice of some virtues. On the evening of 4 August he announced that "the visit of our Mother" would be within a "few hours" and it was necessary not to be found "with empty hands." On 5 August he announced with emotion: "In a few minutes our Mother will be in our house... Open your heart." Finally on the evening of 6 August, he urged them to give thanks, to commit themselves "enthusiastically... permanently just as our Mother's eye is permanently on us."