

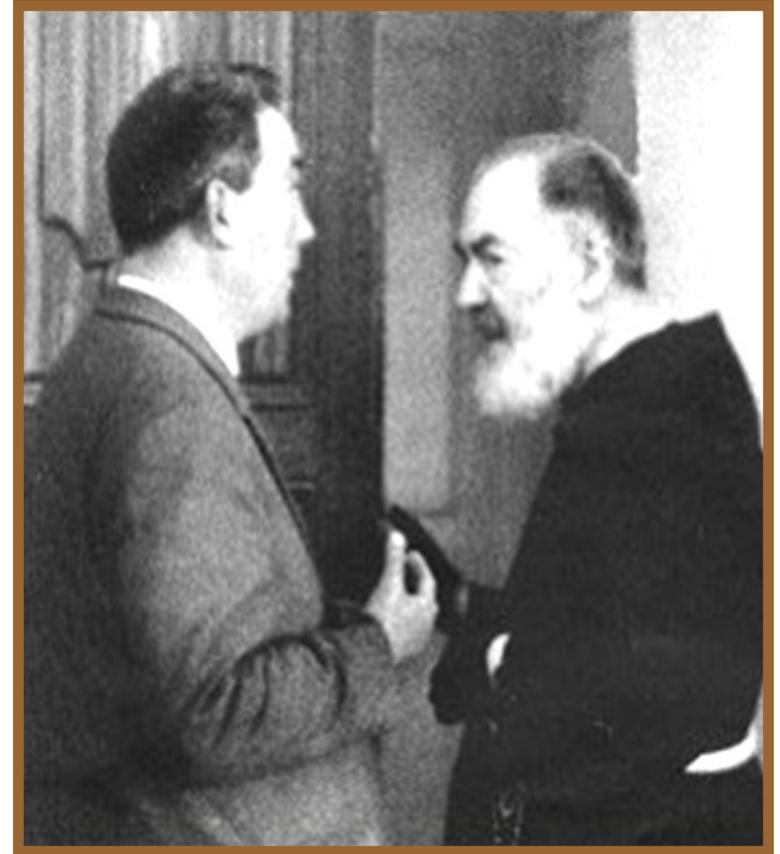
A few days before Padre Pio died, he said to Pietruccio, "I am sorry but I have to leave you." "What do you mean?" Pietruccio asked. "Let us pray about it," Padre Pio replied. Padre Pio died a few days later.

Pietruccio felt shattered by Padre Pio's death. The thought of never seeing Padre Pio again was almost too much for him to bear. He began to feel, for the first time in his life, the full weight of his blindness. As he reflected on it, he became convinced that when Padre Pio was alive, he had carried the cross of his blindness for him. At that time, it did not seem to Pietruccio that it was a burden to be blind. But after Padre Pio passed away, he truly felt that it was a heavy cross.



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## Padre Pio and Pietro (Pietruccio) Cugino



Pietruccio Cugino with Padre Pio

You may for a time have to suffer the distress of many trials; but this is so that your faith, which is more precious than the passing splendor of fire-tried gold, may by its genuineness lead to praise, glory, and honor when Jesus Christ appears.

1 Peter 1:6-7

# Padre Pio and Pietro (Pietruccio) Cugino

Pietro (Pietruccio) Cugino, of San Giovanni Rotondo was just six years old when his father took him to see Padre Pio for the first time. As time passed, Padre Pio grew to love Pietruccio with a fatherly affection. He gave Pietruccio instructions in the Catholic faith and prepared him to receive his first Holy Communion.

In the early days, farmers brought their sheep, horses, and donkeys to the monastery to be blessed by Padre Pio. Pietruccio often helped herd the animals onto the square just outside the church. When Pietruccio was twelve years old, he contracted an incurable eye disease and lost his sight. Even though he was blind, he still found many ways to assist Padre Pio. He liked picking the special wild herbs that Padre Pio enjoyed in his salad. Twice a day he went to the post office to collect the mail for the Capuchins. He did the shopping for the Capuchins as well. He became so familiar with the monastery and the surrounding area that he did not need a cane to get about. He knew every stone, every turn, every step and incline by heart. He became almost a permanent fixture at the monastery.

Padre Pio once said to some of his friends, "Consider the fact that Pietruccio is indeed fortunate. Because of his blindness, he is not able to see the sinful and evil things in this world." As a matter of fact, Pietruccio used to thank God that he was blind because through it, he felt that he received many extra graces from Padre Pio, graces that were not given to others. He was allowed to go to Padre Pio's cell whenever he wanted to. He would often visit Padre Pio in his cell in the evening and stay until Padre Pio got in bed. Then he would kneel at his bedside to receive his blessing.

Through the many years of their friendship, Padre Pio kept Pietruccio at his side. When he was weak and unsteady on his feet, he used to say to Pietruccio, "You lend me your arm and I will lend you my eyes." He would lean upon Pietruccio's strong arm when he walked from the monastery to the church. When Padre Pio became advanced in years, due to his many ailments, he sometimes had difficulty changing his clothing. Pietruccio counted it a privilege to assist him.

Each morning, Pietruccio was given a great honor. He preceded Padre Pio out of the sacristy when it was time for the Mass to begin and was allowed to stand very close to the altar for the duration of the Mass.

For Pietruccio, just to be near Padre Pio was a great, inestimable gift. It filled him with a deep joy, a joy that sustained him in all the ups and downs of his life. Every morning when Pietruccio woke up, he would reflect on the previous day. In his mind, he would go over everything that Padre Pio had said and done. Because he loved Padre Pio so much, he wanted to savor every memory.

Once, Pietruccio told Padre Pio that he had a great fear. "Padre Pio," Pietruccio said. "I feel that as long as you are alive, you will always be near to help me. But because of my blindness, I worry about my future. What will happen to me after your death? Who will take care of me?" "The God who helped us yesterday, helps us today, and will help us tomorrow," Padre Pio replied. "He wants us to abandon ourselves completely into his care."