

Madonna della Libera



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Padre Pio and The Blessed Mother



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Padre Pio and The Blessed Mother

Padre Pio had a great devotion to the Blessed Mother. This devotion was present from early childhood and lasted throughout his entire life. In the small town of Pietrelcina where he was born, devotion to the Madonna has been a characteristic of the people's spirituality for many centuries. Our Lady of Liberty or Deliverance (Madonna della Libera) is the special patroness of the area and is venerated in the main church. The story of Our Lady of Liberty goes back nearly fifteen hundred years to the time of St. Barbatus who was then the bishop of Benevento. Every year there is a festival in honor of Our Lady with a procession through the streets. The region which Padre Pio grew up in as a child had been overrun by foreign invaders especially the Byzantine Greeks. These invaders inflicted many horrors on other towns in southern Italy, especially in the Naples area, and now they had set up camp in the valley between Benevento and the neighboring hillside towns which included Pietrelcina. The residents credit Our Lady of Liberty for their freedom and they maintain a special devotion to Our Lady to this day.

Coming from an extremely devout family, every morning Padre Pio's family would gather for morning prayers. They went to church every day and prayed the Rosary together as a family every evening. Prayer came before all the other activities in the Forgione (his family name) household. Maria Giuseppa, Padre Pio's mother, also had a great devotion to Our Lady of Mount Carmel.

When Padre Pio was 14 years old, he visited the shrine in Pompeii dedicated to Our Lady. Our Lady of Pompeii was especially dear to his heart and often when he needed a special grace for himself or for someone else, he would ask his friends to pray to Our Lady of Pompeii for his intentions. He wrote, "I should like to ask you, if it is not inconvenient, to do me the kindness of making three consecutive novenas to the Virgin of Pompeii for a grace to be obtained for me from her Son, a grace which will mean a great deal for a certain soul." On another occasion he wrote, "I thank you for the novenas you made for me to our Lady of Pompeii and I would ask you if it is not inconvenient, to continue because I am in great need."

In his letters to his spiritual directors, Padre Pio called the Blessed Mother, "beautiful Virgin Mary.... most tender mother of priests... Mediatrix of all graces." In our Lady, he saw the advocate of sinners, the most beloved and the consoler. Reciting the Angelus he rarely managed to restrain his emotions and when he spoke about her it was not unusual for him to shed tears.

The Sorrowful Virgin was another tribute of Mary that was close to his heart. He loved to contemplate her at the foot of the cross. To his spiritual children he would say, "go and keep company with Jesus in his passion, and with His Sorrowful Mother."

From the day on which he first became a priest he always preferred to say Mass at Our Lady's altar. The Mass he celebrated most frequently was the Mass of the



Padre Eusebio Notte



Brother Joseph Martin with Padre Pio

Immaculate Conception. "The Immaculate Conception," he said, "is the first step on the path of salvation."

To a spiritual daughter who asked Padre Pio for a thought on the Madonna, he said, "My daughter, it is enough for you to know that Mary is the Mother of Jesus... She loves us so much that she offered to God the Father His only natural Son to save His adopted sons... She is a great and immeasurable treasure who encloses in herself an infinite treasure, the Son of God."

Padre Pio used to speak of being inundated with graces by her. "She treats me as if I were her only child on the face of the earth," he wrote. He spoke of the tenderness of Our Lady who accompanied him to the altar. "What care she took to accompany me to the altar this morning. It seems to me that she has nothing else to think about except myself as she filled my whole heart with sentiments of holy love."

Padre Eusebio Notte, personal assistant of Padre Pio, once said to him, "You see Our Lady, don't you?" He answered, "She comes to me whenever I need her." He also said that she remained beside him when he heard confessions. "Her loving care toward me cannot be described in words," he said.

Padre Pio's love for Mary was evident as he prayed the Rosary whenever there was a free moment in his busy day and when there were no free moments, he found a way to pray even then. He preferred the Rosary above all other prayers and asked his spiritual children to carry a Rosary with them at all times and to pray it every day. For him the Rosary represented the continual meditation on the profound mysteries of God's design for salvation.

Padre Pio said many rosaries over the course of a day, and he was given a special grace for accomplishing this devotion. His spirit of prayer made what seemed impossible for others possible for him. "The Lord asked this of me; he does not ask the same of you," he said. Once someone asked him how he was able to pray so many rosaries. "You can do one thing at a time," he replied, but I can do three or four."

Once he said to one of the friars, "My son, if we do what we have always done, what our fathers did before us, we cannot go wrong. Satan wants to destroy this prayer, but in this he will never succeed. The Rosary is the prayer of those who triumph over everything and everyone. It was Our Lady who taught us this prayer, just as it was Jesus who taught us the Our Father." Padre Pio defined the Rosary as "The synthesis of our faith, the expression of our charity, and the foundation of our hope."

Father Alessio Parente said, "I was at his side for six years, and in all that time I never saw him without the Rosary in his hands night and day. Our Lady never refused him anything through the Rosary. The Rosary was his constant link with Our Lady."

Not only did Padre Pio have a profound devotion to the Mother of God, but he also seemed to know the dispositions of her heart. An image of the Madonna was found to be weeping in one of the parish churches in Italy. The Bishop of the diocese asked for an investigation into the matter, and after much study the Bishop declared it to be authentic. When Padre Pio was told about this he said, "When Our Lady is weeping, things are not going well."

William (Bill) Martin, who later became Father Joseph Pius Martin, from Brooklyn New York, first met Padre Pio in 1959. It was during his second visit in 1964 that he found it very hard to leave. As he was waiting for the bus to take him to Foggia, to his great relief a friar came running to tell him that Padre Pio had sent him to say that he wanted Bill to remain in San Giovanni Rotondo. He entered the friary as a third order Franciscan and was known to everyone as Brother Bill. He became Padre Pio's personal assistant. One afternoon as he was sitting next to Padre Pio on the balcony near Padre Pio's cell, he was thinking to himself how very fortunate he was that he had been able to be so close to Padre Pio through the years. He wondered to himself who had obtained this marvelous grace for him. No words passed between the two but at the moment that Brother Bill was thinking those thoughts Padre Pio turned to him and said, "It was Our Lady." We have had the good fortune of meeting Father Bill and to converse with him about Padre Pio. He always had a smile on his face and he would go out of his way to receive anyone especially coming from the United States. Once I asked how he was doing and he said "great" but that he ate too much pasta. Shortly after another visit to San Giovanni Father Bill passed away and is now in heaven with Padre Pio.

The Virgin Mary assisted Padre Pio in a special way regarding the state of his health. Although he suffered from poor health his entire life he did not become discouraged. He offered all of his sufferings to the Lord for the conversion of sinners and for the souls in purgatory. He said that God had "Put the problem of my health and a victorious outcome into the hands of our heavenly Mother." Once when he was ill, he confided to his Superior, "What made me suffer more than anything was not being able to say even one Ave Maria."

Not only was the Virgin present to Padre Pio in times of physical infirmity but also in times of interior trials and spiritual sufferings. On August 15, 1929 on the Feast of the Assumption, Padre Pio described an experience of Our Lady while he was celebrating Mass. "This morning I went up to the holy altar I know not how. Physical pain and interior grief competed as to which could most afflict all my poor being... A mortal sadness pervaded me through and through and I thought that all was finished for me... At the moment of consuming the Sacred Species of the Host, a sudden light flooded through me and I clearly saw the Heavenly Mother with the Christ Child in her arms who together said to me, "Stop worrying! We are with you, you belong to Us and We are yours."

Padre Pio also testifies to the Virgin Mary's help in a number of letters to his spiritual directors. On May 26, 1910 he wrote to Father Benedetto, "My only regret, dear Father, is that I have no adequate means with which to thank the Blessed Virgin Mary, through whose intercession I have undoubtedly received so much strength from the Lord, to bear with sincere resignation the many humiliations to which I am subjected to day after day... and I do not believe this strength comes to me from the world."

There were always crowds around Padre Pio, especially the sick, trying to get close to him and touch him. To the sick and the suffering who implored his help, he would say to them, "entrust yourself to Our Lady." Often he would say, "Let us pray to Our Lady that she snatch this grace for you from the Heart of Jesus." For those who came to him with especially difficult personal problems, family problems, etc. he would often say, "Here we need the Madonna."

Cleonice Morcaldi, one of Padre Pio's spiritual daughters, spoke to Padre Pio on September 20, 1968 just three days before he died. "Father, give me at least one word," she said to him. "Love the Madonna and make her loved. Always recite her Rosary. This is an armor against the evils of the world today." Cleonice asked him, "Is the Madonna close to you?" "A Mother..." he replied. "All of Paradise is near her."

Padre Pio died on September 23, 1968. Padre Pellegrino Funicelli, his brother in religion, assisted him in his last moments on earth. He said that a short time before Padre Pio's death and with great tenderness, Padre Pio gazed at a picture of Our Lady of Liberty that was hanging in his cell. He passed into eternal life peacefully and gently. He died with his Rosary. His last words were - Jesus and Mary which he repeated over and over until he breathed his last.



Padre Pellegrino Funicelli