

In the United States, many groups include the Sacrifice of the Mass at their meetings. Some groups conduct a Holy Hour, with exposition and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. Others recite the decades of the rosary, with or without a short meditation before each decade. Still others recite common prayers from a booklet, especially the prayers which were recited by Padre Pio in the Church of Our Lady of Grace. The spiritual director always gives a short sermon.

Some groups have a social after the meeting, perhaps with slides or films of Padre Pio and his works.

In theory, no officers are necessary. But it is usually wise to have a leader and perhaps a secretary, over and above the spiritual director, to help in the planning and administration of the meetings. If free will offerings are collected, a treasurer will be necessary, perhaps to offer the spiritual director a stipend for his Mass and a donation to the pastor for the use of the parish facilities.

The Capuchins in San Giovanni Rotondo are anxious, almost to the point of mania, that the name of Padre Pio never be used for fundraising. Few people, however, see any danger in the sale of rosaries or literature, pictures and other small items about Padre Pio.

The Prayer Groups have no initiation ceremony, no period of probation, no dues. Only a willingness to pray and to cooperate with the group leader and the spiritual director.

Each group must be registered at the Casa Sollievo in San Giovanni Rotondo. No Prayer Group may be established without the express permission of the pastor of the parish in which they will meet. No Prayer Group may be started without a priest as the spiritual director.

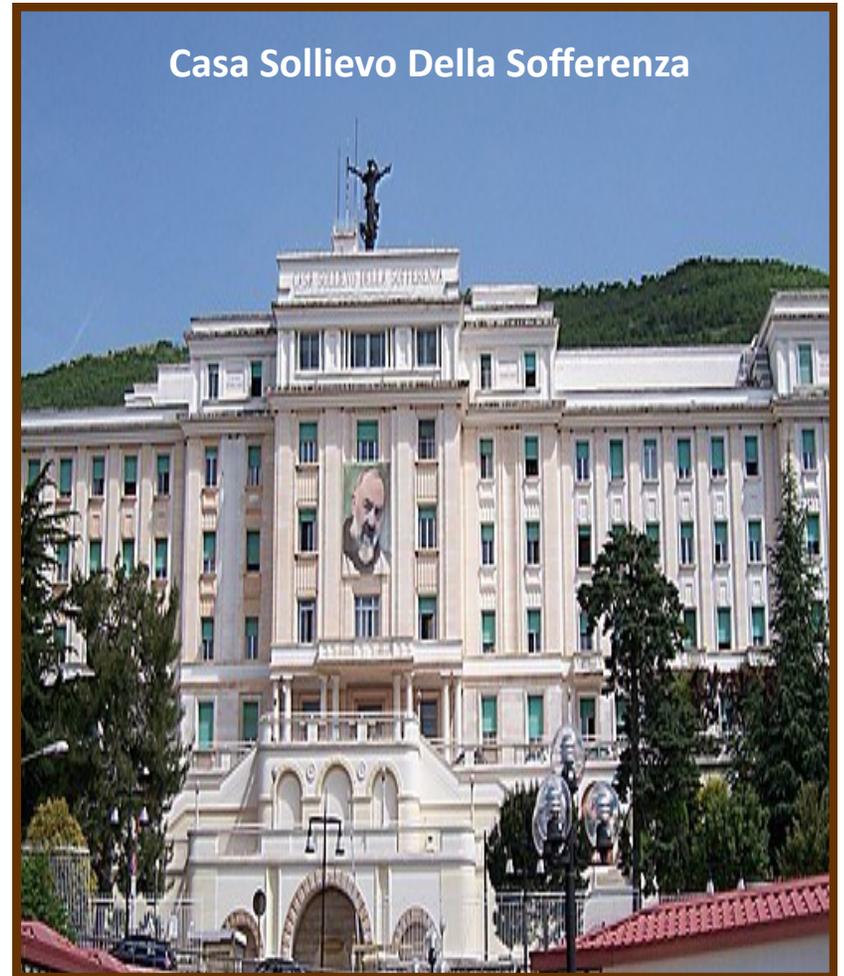
"Padre Pio prayed that Prayer Groups would become beacons of light throughout the world," says Padre Lino Barbati, the Capuchin Superior of the Convento at San Giovanni Rotondo. "We have Prayer Groups all over the world, in the United States, Germany, England, Ireland, France, Switzerland, all over the world.

"People who did not know Father while he was alive, have come to recognize him after his death. Through the Prayer Groups, through his spiritual children, one person will speak of him and another will carry the message."

Within the Padre Pio's Prayer Groups, a group which calls itself "The Friends of Padre Pio" is worthy of special note. This group is perhaps unique because it began in 1957 at the direct intervention of Padre Pio, but also because it is promoting a project which was approved and blessed by Padre Pio himself, namely, a Mental Health Institute in Italy. Its aim is the integration of psychotherapy and medicine with spiritual and moral assistance.

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## The Social Works of Padre Pio



**One of Padre Pio's Greatest Works — His Hospital  
"The Home for the Relief of Suffering"  
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# The Social Works of Padre Pio

The Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza (the Home for the Relief of Suffering) towers above the town of San Giovanni Rotondo as the first and most conspicuous of Padre Pio's social works. Physically, the Casa is a beautiful hospital with almost one thousand beds, providing medical services which will match any hospital in Italy and perhaps in the world.

Padre Pio did not want it to be called the hospital. "Hospitals," he said, "are places of suffering. This is a Home for the Relief of Suffering." In it, Faith and medical practice are the twin therapies which cure the whole person. "We are not only building a hospital," he insisted, "but we are cooperating in the work of Christ's redemption by the pains and sufferings of the people."

Capped with a heliport, the five-story, 200 foot long center unit of the Casa is located across the piazza from the convento. Like the convento and church themselves, the Casa is slotted into the mountain which rises behind it like the back of a grizzly bear, 1800 feet above the plains of Foggia. A triple tier of satellite buildings are also shelved into the mountain around the Casa like cubs scampering for the nursing breast.

Padre Pio first got the idea to build a hospital when tragedy after tragedy struck down the poor townfolk. Often they died en route to the hospital in Foggia as they bumped along the fourteen miles of dirt roads in their horse drawn or ox strong wagons. "I heard these sad stories time after time," he said. "I felt sorry for them."

Even in Foggia, medical care was far from perfect. Padre Pio once saw a man from San Giovanni Rotondo who had been wounded by a mine. The victim was taken to Foggia, almost bleeding to death, and was left on a cot in the corridor, because no room was available and no doctor had time to treat him.

When Padre Pio heard that after a week the man was still waiting to be treated, he decided to build a hospital in San Giovanni Rotondo.

When Padre Pio first revealed his plans for a hospital, few people agreed with his judgment. "Where will you get the money?" They asked.

Two doctors supported him, Dr. Mario Sanvico and Dr. Carlo Kiswarday. The diary of Dr. Sanvico tells us how the dream began to materialize. After the meeting in Padre Pio's room at 6:30 p.m. on June 9, 1940, Padre Pio said: "from this evening my great earthly work begins, I bless you and all those who will contribute to my work, which will be so beautiful and so great."

Padre Pio lived to see work begin on the new Way of the Cross. Now completed, the Stations were executed in bronze by the internationally famous Francesco Messina. Although he was on in years, he eagerly accepted Padre Pio's invitation, because he wanted to dedicate his last great creation to Padre Pio. The path for the Way of the Cross meanders along the side of the mountain behind the church and hospital, crisscrossing a single flight of steps which stab straight up the flank of the mountain. Unfortunately, Padre Pio died before this monumental Way of the Cross was dedicated by Cardinal Ursi in 1971.

There is another cub of the lioness which we have not yet mentioned, namely the Prayer Groups. He envisioned them, too, in 1957, as centers "in every part of the world where the children of the Casa Sollievo can join together to pray according to the spirit of the Seraphic Father St. Francis of Assisi and according to the directives and the intentions of the Pope."

The hub of these Prayer Groups is the Casa itself, because he saw the Casa as the lioness and the Prayer Groups as cubs at her breast. That is why he referred to the members of the Prayer Groups as "Children of the Work." He said that his spiritual children "must find here a common home of their Prayer Groups." On July 31, 1968 shortly before Padre Pio's death, the Prayer Groups were given official recognition by the Vatican. Their director, appointed by the Congregation for Religious, was Padre Carmelo, the Capuchin Superior of Our Lady of Grace Friary.

Today, the Prayer Groups number about 900, with about 70,000 members. Because of their affiliation with the Casa, the Prayer Groups, like the Casa, are no longer under the direction of the Capuchins, but under the Director of the Casa who is an appointee of the Vatican.

Padre Pio said that if his spiritual children would meet to promote a prayer life, they would advance in the spiritual life. Today, the Prayer Groups continue as he established them, with an affiliation with the Casa.

There is no set agenda for the meetings of the Prayer Groups. Their program is worked out by the spiritual director. The only rules Padre Pio gave the Prayer Groups were: common prayer, charity, obedience to the Church and perseverance. It would be hard to list any virtues which were more typical of the spirituality of the Wise Man himself.

The Prayer Groups generally meet for one hour each month, in a home, a chapel or church or parish hall. Their membership includes priests, religious and laity. They observe what Padre Pio specified: they pray for the Church, for the Pope, for world peace, and especially for the patients in the Home for the Relief of Suffering.

First of all, he envisioned the development of the hospital itself. "The Home must increase the number of its beds. They must be added two houses, one for women and one for men, where tired souls and bodies will come to the Lord and receive relief from Him.

"We must develop this work, so that it shall become a powerhouse of prayer and science, where the human race shall find peace in Jesus Crucified in one fold under one shepherd."

He urged that "priests and doctors feel the burning desire to continue the love of God in the work of charity among the sick, so that both they and their patients may live together in Him Who is Light and Love."

He envisioned a whole "hospital city technically adequate to meet the most advanced medical and surgical demands."

He envisioned "an international center of studies, which will enable doctors to further their professional studies and their formation as Christians."

He envisioned a retreat house where "priests will find here their Upper Room." He envisioned a home for "religious men and women, who will attend even more to their spiritual formation and assent to God so that in Faith, in detachment, and in self-surrender they may live the love of God, the consummation of Christian perfection."

He envisioned a hospital home for the spastic and retarded children, a home for retired priests, homes for the aged, nurseries and day care centers for children, and a Way of the Cross off the Viale Cappuccini.

He envisioned what we might call the Religious and Medical Center of Europe.

All these projects were dear to Padre Pio's heart. Understandably so, because he said: "They are not only my works, but God's just as He shows me."

Some of these projects are already in operation. The retreat house is now open and can accommodate thirty retreatants. Down the Viale Cappuccini is the Center for Spastic and Retarded Children. In 1971 and 1972, two more Centers for Spastic Rehabilitation were opened in Manfredonia and Termoli respectively.

The Spastic Center in San Giovanni Rotondo also serves as one of the four day care centers for small boys and girls. Another of these nurseries provides a boarding school for boys and girls. Staffed by four different Orders of nuns, all four centers are under the umbrella of the Capuchin Friars.

He appointed Dr. Kiswarday as treasurer and pressed a gold ten franc napoleon, worth a few cents, into his hands: "I, too, want to contribute my small offering," he said.

The second contributor was no richer. Mr. Pietruccio, a blind man, from San Giovanni Rotondo contributed two lira, only a few cents.

The next entry in Dr. Sanvico's diary fills us in on Padre Pio's choice of a name: "this evening, at seven o'clock, I asked the Father what he will call his work. He answered me promptly: 'Relief of Suffering.'"

By 1946, about six thousand dollars have been collected. But wartime inflation devalued it to 1/80<sup>th</sup> of its prewar value. Padre Pio and his nucleus of believers never lost hope.

Then in 1946, Miss Barbara Ward, a noted author from London, visited San Giovanni Rotondo. She was so impressed by Padre Pio and his plans that she later spoke to Fiorello LaGuardia, the ex-mayor of New York City and Director General of UNRRA. Her initiative resulted in a grant of about \$340,000.00 from UNRRA funds.

Most of the money for the hospital was donated by people from the United States. The Americans were very dear to the heart of Padre Pio because of this self-sacrificing generosity. Along the length of its roof the hospital flies the flags of the nations which helped in its construction. The American flag flies proudly in the center, second only to the Italian flag.

Toward the end of 1947, the last beams of the hospital were in place. The outpatient department was open in 1954 and full hospital facilities in 1956.

Other than Padre Pio, the masterminds of the Casa were Dr. William Sanguinetti, and a self-taught engineer, Angelo Lupi, a man with only an elementary school education. Padre Pio had reasons of his own for choosing Mr. Lupi over many professional engineers. His choice proved wise. Mr. Lupi quarried lime and stone from the mountains for do-it-yourself construction for bathtubs, sinks, bowls, indoor and outdoor tiles and paneling. He built a special lime kiln, and from the stone he extracted lime for the plaster. From scaffolding and from left over wood he fabricated the finest furniture. He made the iron beds and wrought iron furnishings.

Because there was no water on the site, Mr. Lupi constructed a tie-in with the aqueduct of Apulia. Also, he built large cisterns and collected rainwater from the terrace. For electricity, he erected a power plant with a diesel driven generator. His ingenuity saved a fortune and produced a magnificent and eminently functional building.

When the hospital was dedicated on May 5, 1956, it hosted an international seminar of the European Society of Cardiology. The president of the Society, Dr. Gustav Nylin, from Sweden, called the hospital "a magnificent work of charity."

"On this memorable day of the inauguration of this home," Dr. Nylin said, "we pay our deferential respects to Padre Pio, author of this magnificent work of charity. In his firm Faith and his love for neighbor, Padre Pio offers us a splendid example of self-denial in the service of humanity. This hospital is a tangible example of the Good Samaritan. With all our hearts we expressed the wish that God may bless Padre Pio's noble and merciful activity. It is in the capacity of President of the European Society of Cardiology that I have had the privilege of addressing you these few words."

Dr. Paul Dudley White, President Eisenhower's personal physician, officially represented the United States. "This hospital," he said, "more than any other in the world, seems to me to be suitable for the study of the relationship between the soul and sickness. Here, more than anywhere, progress can be made in the study of the psychosomatic."

Professor Wagersteen, another doctor from the United States, said: "Everything here is beautiful, good and wonderful, but it saddens me to think that in the world there is only one Padre Pio. It is a great pity that there are not more."

Padre Pio laughed aloud and said: "God forbid!" And he covered his face.

If we consider the typical reserve of most doctors and of the British doctors in particular, we may be surprised by the exuberance of Dr. Evans, from England: "this is the finest weekend I have ever spent in my life, and my meeting with Padre Pio is the most important moment of my most important weekend. Thank you, Padre Pio."

Padre Pio addressed the doctors on this occasion. "What can I say?" He began. "You have come into the world in the same way as I, with a mission to fulfill. I speak to you of duty, at a time when everyone talks only of rights! I, as a religious and a priest, have a mission to accomplish. As a religious and a Capuchin, I am bound to the perfect and strict observers of my Rule and vows. As a priest, mine is a mission of atonement, of propitiating God for the sins of mankind."

"All this may come to pass if I am in God's grace. But if I go astray from God, how can I make amends for others? How can I become a mediator with the Most High?"

"You have the mission of curing the sick. But if at the patient's bedside you do not bring the warmth of loving care, I do not think that medicines will be of much use. I can prove this from my own experience. During my illness in 1916 – 1917, my doctors, while curing me, brought me words of consolation."

"Love cannot do without words. And you yourselves, how can you, other than by words, bring spiritual comfort to a patient?"

"Later on I went to a specialist, who told me bluntly that I had tuberculosis and that I had only about another year to live. I returned home, grieved to death, but resigned to God's will. As you can see, I am still here! The Specialist's prophecy did not come true. But not all patients are like Padre Pio of 1916 – 1917."

"Bring God to the sick! It will be more valuable than any other cure. And may the Lord bless you all, your families, and particularly your work in your patients. This is the most ardent wish of a priest's heart."

One of the Brothers who was among the closest to Padre Pio remarked: "I've often thought that Our Lord gave him such an extraordinary charitable work as the hospital to give him an interest in something on this earth."

Since its opening, the Casa has graduated over 300 registered nurses from its School of Nursing. A maintenance staff of 165 cleans the entire tile and marble hospital twice a day. The total hospital staff is 507. A lady from New York City, who went there just for treatment, said that "the cleanliness of the hospital amounted almost to an obsession with the maintenance personnel."

The rates per day for hospital bed are about \$14.75. Most patients are covered by insurance. But if they are not, their bills are covered by the Stelling, the Little Stars of Charity, to which people from all over the world contribute.

Two Capuchin priests serve as full-time chaplains. However, the total administration of the Casa Sollievo is now directly in the hands of the Vatican. Until his death in 1968, Padre Pio was its administrator. Then the Holy See appointed Msgr. Oreste Vighetti as administrator.

When Padre Pio died, many people feared the hospital's financial collapse. With Padre Pio gone, who would contribute to his work? If you visit San Giovanni Rotondo today you will see three wings under construction, for obstetrics, gynecology, and pediatrics. Plans are being made for additional departments for the treatment of eyes and mental health.

One year after the dedication of the hospital, Padre Pio revealed a broader view which he had for the Casa. It was to be a motherhouse, the first among other institutions, like a lioness bearing and nourishing her cubs.