

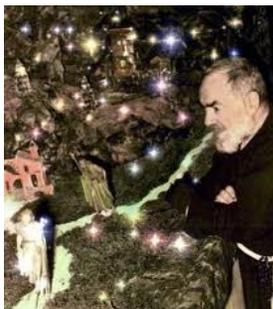
The young Francesco, the future Padre Pio, wanted his crib scene To be as beautiful as possible. He also wished to light it up to make the scene as evocative as possible. At that time in Pietrelcina, there was no electricity and it was necessary to use oil lights. They had to be very small to enable Francesco to insert them in the moss, next to the tiny houses and beside the flocks of sheep.

The ingeniousness of the young boy was remarkable for those times. Francesco and his friends had learned to make lights made from snail shells. They would look for empty shells in the fields, clean them well, fill them with oil, add a wick and they would thus have a magnificent little lantern.

For Padre Pio, every Christmas was an occasion for spiritual renewal. It helped him and encouraged him to nurture within himself that unconditional love for humanity that the occasion symbolized, above all his love for the most humble the poor and the suffering.

Whatever you do unto these little ones you do unto me, it says in the Gospel. Padre Pio had molded his own heart on that teaching. He rarely spoke of himself. But one did, at the specific request of his spiritual director, he did so, revealing how his heart was full of generosity and dedication towards others. Since it was a delicate subject, he wrote in the third person, writing as though he were referring to someone else, although it was clear that he was writing about himself. It seems to me that God has poured many graces into this soul regarding compassion for the sufferings of others, particularly in the case of the poor and needy. The great compassion which his soul feels when he sees poor people causes within him a most pressing desire to run to their aid. If I looked at my own will, it would impel me to remove my own clothes to dress them. If I know that a person is suffering both mentally and physically, what would I not ask of Our Lord to free that person from his ills. I would quite happily take on all his afflictions in order to save him, yielding the fruits of these sufferings in his favour, if Our Lord would allow me to do so.

*excerpted from: www.saintanthonyofpadua.net



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Padre Pio's Christmas



Midnight Mass in Pietrelcina, Italy

***Padre Pio carrying Baby Jesus to place Him
In the manger on Christmas Eve***

Padre Pio's Christmas

*The Passion and Death of the Son of God were always part of Padre Pio's meditations, he himself had become a living image of Christ on the Cross, as Pope Paul VI called him. But he had only accepted that choice because he had understood that suffering is the mysterious road to Redemption.

His true love, however, was for Christmas, the period which he found most fascinating, a time of year which exercised an enormous appeal on his sensitive nature. The image of the Baby Jesus provoked feelings of infinite tenderness within him, often moving him to tears.

His spirituality, along with emotions which were honest, simple and powerful, his empathy, his kindness, compassion and affection, all found complete harmony in the mystery of Christ's birth, because in that event he could see fully God's boundless love towards humanity.

All those who knew Padre Pio and spent time with him agree that Christmas was the liturgical feast which he most appreciated. He would prepare for this feast meticulously, and celebrate it with an enthusiasm that was enchanting. This he would do every year, both as a young man and when he was old. Fr. Ignazio da Ielsi, the guardian of the convent at San Giovanni Rotondo from 1922 to 1925, when Padre Pio was still young and had just received the *stigmata*, wrote in his diary: It is unnecessary to say with what passion Padre Pio celebrates Christmas. He thinks about it all the time. He counts the days to go from one Christmas or the next. The Baby Jesus holds a special attraction for him. It is enough for him to hear a Christmas carol or a lullaby and his spirit soars. To look at him you'd think he were in ecstasy.

Padre Pio was always a humble and reserved friar. He never asked anything for himself, considering himself the least among his brothers. But he loved the privilege of celebrating the Midnight Mass at Christmas in the little church at San Giovanni Rotondo. Since this was a solemn Mass, the privilege of celebrating it would have normally been reserved for the guardian, but knowing how dear that particular Mass was to Padre Pio, successive guardians always allowed him to celebrate it.

It was a celebration which always made a profound impression on those fortunate enough to attend. It was indeed a long Mass, sometimes only finishing at five o'clock in the morning. The friary itself was very difficult to reach, especially in the 1920's and 1930's. The road was a rocky mule path

which led from the residential part of the city to the friary and in winter, it was almost always covered in snow and ice. Even so, many people would undertake the journey in order to attend Padre Pio's Christmas Mass.

One day Padre Pio wrote to his confessor: May the Heavenly Child let your heart feel all those holy emotions that he allowed me to experience that blessed night when he was laid in the little hovel. Goodness, I could hardly express what I felt in my heart on that most happy night. My heart was overflowing with holy love towards God made man. To Raffaolina Cerase, a spiritual daughter, he wrote: When the Holy Novena begins in honour of the Baby Jesus, it felt as though my spirit were being born again to a new life. I felt as though my heart were too small to embrace all our heavenly blessings. My soul felt as thou it were disintegrating in the presence of our God who had become man. How can we not love Him forever with a fervor that never grows stale: Let us open our hearts to the Baby Jesus whose soul was without the stain of sin and we will taste how sweet it is to love Him. His brother friars remember that Padre Pio wanted the crib in their church to be placed opposite the confessional so that he could see it while he administered the sacrament of penance. He would remain in the confessional for hours and hours each day, his gaze fixed on the statue of the Baby Jesus.

Padre Pio practiced this great devotion to the crib, which is so reminiscent of Saint Francis, even as a child when he lived with his parents. At his home in Pietrelcina, he always wanted to prepare the crib himself. He would start work on it as early as October. While he pastured the family's flock of sheep with his friends, he would search for the clay he would use to fashion the small statues of shepherds, sheep, and the other characters which he would place in the crib scene. He became very quick and accomplished in this task, and would prepare statuettes for his friends, too.

He would take particular care when making the model of the Baby Jesus. He would make and re-make the Christ-child continually, remembered one of his playmates, Luigi Orlando. When he had finished he would place the statue on the palm of his hand and say: 'It isn't as I wanted it.' He would then roll the statue into a ball of clay again, and make another statue, more to his liking.