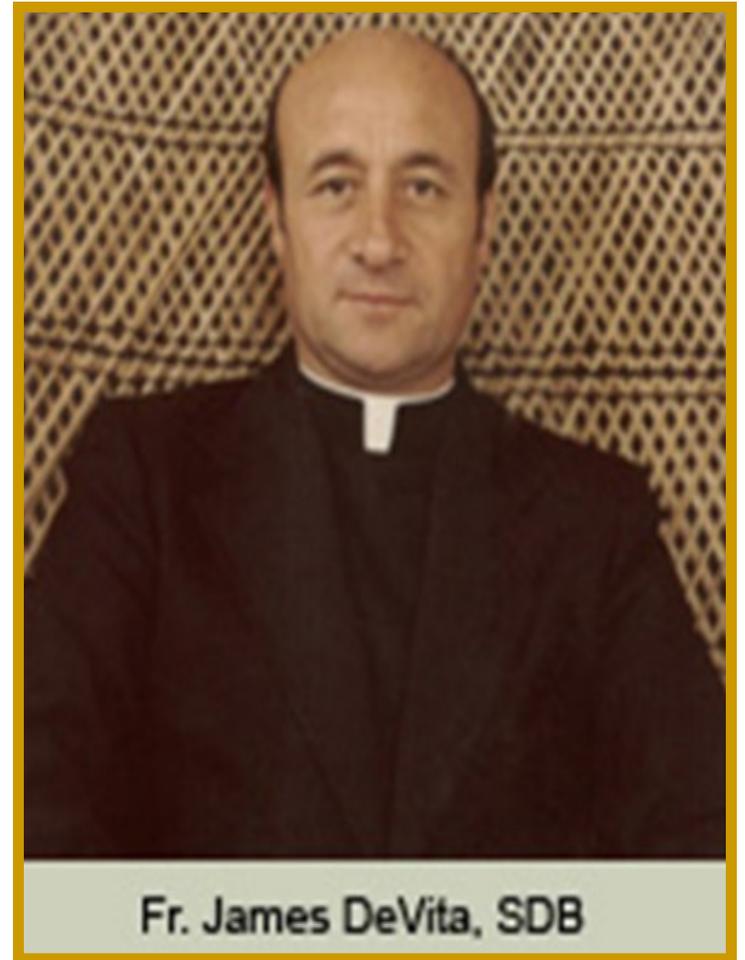


A photo from early days of Padre Pio as a young priest.

Padre Pio and Fr. James DeVita, SDB



Fr. James DeVita, SDB

Fr. DeVita made his confession to Padre Pio on a number of occasions. At that time, confessions were face to face and neither a screen nor a curtain was provided for privacy.

Fr. James DeVita, SDB Of Florida Shares His Story of Padre Pio With Us

Father James DeVita, SDB, was born and raised in San Giovanni Rotondo, the town where Padre Pio lived for almost 50 years. Padre Pio's name was a household word in the DeVita family. Fr. DeVita's mother, Agnes, was a member of the 3rd Order of St. Francis. Padre Pio often encouraged people to join the 3rd Order of St. Francis, calling it a "school of holiness." As a young woman, Agnes used to bake pizza and take it to the monastery for the Capuchins to enjoy for dinner.

When Fr. DeVita was a teenager, he used to walk with his boyhood friends to the monastery to attend Padre Pio's Mass. On one occasion, he was the altar server for Padre Pio's Mass. It lasted almost two hours with long periods of silent prayer throughout. Padre Pio often lost track of time during the Mass. But as a restless teenager, James DeVita did not lose track of time and to him Padre Pio's Mass was just too long for comfort.

Fr. DeVita also made his confession to Padre Pio on a number of occasions. At that time, the men's confessions were held in the sacristy of the church. Confessions were face to face and neither a screen nor a curtain was provided for privacy. The line formed about four feet away from where the penitent was making his confession. The person kneeling before Padre Pio seemed so exposed. Although nobody was trying to listen, one could practically hear the words being spoken. Waiting in line to make one's confession to Padre Pio could be a nerve-wracking experience. One could easily observe the expression on Padre Pio's face while hearing confessions. When people confessed that they had missed Sunday Mass, Padre Pio became visibly upset. He was extremely strict in this regard. Unless one was sick, missing Mass on Sunday was a grave omission. As a teenager, James DeVita would miss Mass from time to time due to his own negligence. When this occurred, he did not have the courage to make his confession to Padre Pio. He would choose another priest.

In 1957, James DeVita was ordained into the Salesian Order, founded by St. John Bosco. Mary Pyle and the ladies choir that she directed, and that sang for all of Padre Pio's Masses, came to the parish of San Onofrio in San Giovanni Rotondo to provide the music for James' ordination Mass. When Fr. DeVita celebrated his first Mass, he had the great joy to wear one of Padre Pio's priestly stoles.

Before he moved to the United States, Fr. DeVita went to Padre Pio to say goodbye. "But there is so much work for priests to do here in Italy," Padre Pio said to him. "Why do you have to move so far away?" Fr. DeVita explained that he wanted to be closer to his family who had emigrated to Canada.

June 29, 2007 marked Fr. James DeVita's golden jubilee anniversary of fifty years in the priesthood. Most of his priestly ministry has been spent serving parishes in New York and New Jersey. Today he is retired and living in Florida where he also assists at a parish. Looking back on his life, Fr. DeVita is very grateful to have grown up in San Giovanni Rotondo and to have had a saint as his role model. Fr. DeVita said that the beautiful words spoken by Pope Paul VI on the life and spirituality of Padre Pio, echo his own sentiments in a profound way. In speaking of Padre Pio, Pope Paul VI said, "What fame he had. How many followers from around the world. Why? Was it because he was a philosopher, a scholar, or because he had means at his disposal? No, it was because he said Mass humbly, heard confessions from morning until night and was a marked representative of the stigmata of Our Lord. He was truly a man of prayer and suffering."

The Capuchins in San Giovanni Rotondo set aside time every day for a period of recreation. For Padre Pio, this time was usually spent in the garden of the monastery, enjoying fellowship with his brothers in religion. As the time drew closer to his ordination day, James DeVita was allowed to visit Padre Pio in the monastery garden anytime he wished. He recalls that Padre Pio delighted in telling funny stories and making everyone laugh. "Padre Pio had a wonderful sense of humor," Fr. DeVita said. "He was a simple man. He was not an intellectual. He was a man of prayer, a man who loved God above all things."

Padre Pio wore brown half gloves to cover the wounds of the stigmata. He would always remove the gloves before the celebration of Mass. On several occasions, Fr. DeVita was able to kiss the stigmata on Padre Pio's hand when his gloves were removed. It was a grace-filled experience and yet it was not something that was easy to do. Fr. DeVita would close his eyes tightly and with trepidation, kiss the wound on Padre Pio's hand.

Because of the inadequate health care in San Giovanni Rotondo in the early years, many of the people in the area died an untimely death. Padre Pio felt compelled to remedy this situation. He worked tirelessly to make the Home for the Relief of Suffering a reality. Fr. DeVita saw first hand, the great blessings of Padre Pio's hospital. Not only did it save the lives of many of the sick and infirm, it was also of great benefit to the poor. San Giovanni Rotondo was an economically depressed region and many of its citizens struggled to find work. The Home for the Relief of Suffering provided much needed jobs for many of the families in the town. Fr. DeVita's own sister Raffaella felt very fortunate to be employed at the hospital.

Fr. DeVita became a patient at the Home for the Relief of Suffering shortly after it opened its doors. He contracted typhoid fever and remained in a coma for four days. A rumor went around San Giovanni Rotondo that James had passed away, but Padre Pio set the record straight. He said, "Do not worry. James has not passed away. He is going to recover."

According to the general opinion, making one's confession to Padre Pio was of inestimable help in the spiritual life. It was true. God gave Padre Pio extraordinary gifts and graces for his priestly work as a confessor. In his lifetime, he reconciled thousands of people back to their faith. He once said that if he had the choice between losing his eyesight or his sense of hearing, he would prefer to lose his eyesight. "Why is that?" someone asked. "It is because with my hearing intact I would still be able to hear confessions," he answered. And hear confessions he did, often more than twelve hours a day. On the last day of his life, although weak and very ill, he heard a number of confessions. Pope Pius XII called him, "The confessor of Europe."

Padre Pio saw his priestly role as confessor as a great responsibility and he always prayed for God's help. "Without the grace of God, we can do nothing," he said. People often came to Padre Pio asking him for advice as to whether certain actions in their daily living experiences were right or wrong. He usually saw questions of right versus wrong in simple, black and white terms. He was able to counsel people in a way that left no doubt in the person's mind regarding the right course to take. He was never tempted to tell people what they wanted to hear. His desire was to tell people the truth.

Padre Pio made no distinction between venial sins and mortal sins. He spoke simply of sin. For Padre Pio, sin was something serious, something terrible. There was to be no compromise with sin. It had to be avoided at all costs. "We will never know what it means to rebel against God," he once said.

Padre Pio said that he had only one fear, that of offending God. He once said, "I would rather undergo death an infinite number of times, rather than openly offend the Lord." On one occasion a person told Padre Pio that he had lied. He explained that it was a very small lie, a white lie. It was of no

consequence. "But Jesus died to defend the truth," Padre Pio answered. "A small lie is a sin that offends God," he said. And he went further. He did not condone exaggeration either, even to the smallest degree.

For those who were sincerely seeking to move forward on the spiritual path, confession to Padre Pio was a great blessing. But for the insincere and those who came simply out of curiosity to Padre Pio's confessional, his spiritual direction was described as "demanding, disturbing, and uncomfortable."

Time and space and distance did not seem to be a barrier in Padre Pio's ministry to souls. On one occasion, one of the Capuchins was just about to knock on the door of Padre Pio's cell when he heard Padre Pio talking to someone inside. He decided not to disturb them but he waited at the door anyway. Soon Padre Pio opened the door but there was no one else inside his cell. "I heard you talking to someone but there is no one there," the Capuchin said. "Oh, I was hearing someone's confession," Padre Pio replied. Through the extraordinary gift of bilocation, Padre Pio was able to be present to people, often great distances away, who were in need of his help.

Padre Pio went to confession frequently and he encouraged others to do the same. When some protested that they did not need to go to confession since they had nothing of consequence to confess, Padre Pio used a simple analogy. "Even if a room is very clean and the door is closed so that no one can enter, the dust will nevertheless collect there and it will require dusting," he said. Once Padre Pio made his confession to Padre Eusebio Notte and afterward he began to cry. Padre Eusebio was perplexed. He told Padre Pio that the sins that he confessed were indeed very small and insignificant. There was certainly no reason to cry. But Padre Pio did not see it that way. He had a horror of offending God, even in small matters. He was always truly sorry for his sins.

When Fr. DeVita was a teenager, he used to take part as an actor in the religious plays that were performed in San Giovanni Rotondo. The plays included the life of St. Cecilia, St. Agnes, St. Peter and more. Padre Pio and the other Capuchins frequently attended the performances and enjoyed them immensely. Rehearsals were held at Mary Pyle's home. Fr. DeVita had a great admiration for Mary Pyle. She was often known simply as, "Padre Pio's American secretary." "Mary was a person of great holiness," said Fr. DeVita. "Her love for God and her great willingness to serve Padre Pio's work was truly amazing."

Mary Pyle was an American heiress who had been born into a very socially prominent and wealthy Protestant family and raised in New York's high society. She had become accustomed to every luxury from her earliest years and had traveled extensively throughout the world. When Mary was 35 years old, she accepted an invitation from a girlfriend to visit Padre Pio's monastery and attend his Mass. During the visit, she was able to speak to Padre Pio briefly. She found her life transformed by the encounter and soon decided to move to San Giovanni Rotondo permanently. She built a house right below the monastery. It was one of the first houses in the area.

Mary joined the 3rd Order of St. Francis and began to lead a simple and austere life, totally consecrated to God. Her workload continually increased through the years but she was always ready and willing to do more to assist Padre Pio. Mary had the heart of a mother, and the charity of a saint. She lived in San Giovanni Rotondo for 45 years until her death in 1968. Her cause for canonization is presently being considered by the Church.