

The memorial of St Padre Pio is celebrated on September 23; so, fairly recently. Padre Pio is also a saint of our times, having died in 1968. He was also a Franciscan (Capuchin) priest, and the memorial of St Francis is October 4. All of these things combined, then, make it an opportune time to say a few words about Padre Pio.

We might begin with his name. His given name was Francesco Forgione, Francesco being the Italian version of Francis. So how did he become Padre Pio? Padre is just the Italian word for father – so as a priest, he was Fr Pio. As for Pio, it is the custom of some religious orders that a person choose a new name when joining that order. This was the custom for the Capuchins, at least in that time and place. So Francesco chose the name Pio. You might sometimes hear him called Pius. He is called St Pius of Pietrelcina, for example, in current English liturgical calendars. Pio is simply the Italian version of the name Pius. With all of that being said, this saint is so widely known, even outside of Italy, as Padre Pio that even those familiar with him might have to think twice about who you're talking about if you called him anything other than Padre Pio. So we'll stick with that name.

Padre Pio was born on May 25, 1887 in a small town in southern Italy called Pietrelcina (pronounced something like: Pee-tra-la-cheena). His parents were Grazio and Maria Forgione. There were 7 children altogether but 2 died as infants. The Forgiones were very devout Catholics, attending Mass and praying a family Rosary every day. Neither his parents nor grandparents had had the opportunity to learn to read but they had memorized much of Sacred Scripture and taught their children the faith through what they had learned. Padre Pio, then, was quite devout and had a strong interest in the faith from a young age. He would later relate that he had visions of Jesus, Mary, and angels since he was a young boy, but never said anything about it because he thought it was normal – that everyone experienced this.

Francesco realized his vocation to the priesthood at a young age. The Capuchins, who all wore beards, had circulated through Padre Pio's area (there are 3 major branches of the Franciscans, one of which are the Capuchins, who were, traditionally, the most strict of the branches). When Francesco was 10 years old he told his mom and dad that he wanted to be a priest, like the ones with the beards. So his mom & dad went to see the Capuchins and learned that Francesco would have to have more schooling than he had before he could enter their order. Like many families in that part of Italy at that time, the Forgione family was on the poor side. His father (Grazio) came to the U.S. in search of work so as to support his family, and especially so that they could send their son to the Capuchins. This gave Padre Pio a certain fondness for the U.S. But more importantly, imagine what a great sacrifice this was for his dad and the whole family. It is a good example to think about.

After completing his novitiate and seminary studies, Padre Pio was finally ordained on August 10, 1910 at the age of 23. In the early years of his priesthood, he experienced a lot of illness. He was moved around some from monastery to monastery, and even sent home once for recuperation, until it was realized that he was in good health only when he was at Our Lady of Grace monastery in San Giovanni Rotondo. As a side note, when I first started reading about Padre Pio, I was curious as to what San Giovanni Rotondo meant. San Giovanni, of course, means St John but Rotondo means round. So the name of the town would be translated as: St John of (or in) the Round. What in the world??! It was hard to find out what that meant, and even now I have to go from memory because I can't find it back. Apparently there is some sort of structure – a shrine or baptistry or something along those lines – that is round and is sort of a centerpiece in the town so it is called: St John in the Round! That's all it means, there is no "St John Round!" The "St John" part refers to St John the Baptist.

In any event, Our Lady of Grace Capuchin monastery was in the township (using American terminology) of San Giovanni Rotondo. The monastery was about a mile out of town. Once it was realized that that was the only place where Padre Pio remained healthy enough to live in community with the Friars, that became his home for the rest of his life. It seems safe to assume that this was the Lord's will for him and that God directed him there through his illnesses. It helps us to remember that nothing falls outside the Providence of God and that He often guides us to Himself in ways that are mysterious to us. So be careful not to buck and scream too hard when difficulties arise because we may be fighting against God's own will.

Now we come to the main part – Padre Pio’s priesthood and his life at San Giovanni Rotondo. Many times, saints might be known locally for their great sanctity but don’t really become extensively known until after their death or canonization. Padre Pio, however, became known world-wide even during his lifetime. Numerous biographies have been written about him, testifying to his notoriety. At one point, Padre Pio was receiving about 1000 letters per day from around the world. What led to him being so well-known?

There were, for one thing, many miracles, especially healings, that came about through the prayer of Padre Pio. Even Pope St John Paul II had heard of him in Poland and, long before he was Pope, had come to San Giovanni Rotondo to see him. He also wrote to him later asking for his intercession for someone he knew who had cancer, or some terminal disease. He also had what is called the gift of prophecy. One priest said that his mother, who lived close by, would often ask Padre Pio about what she should do. She once asked him if she should go on some trip and he told her no. She asked why but he wouldn’t say exactly – just that she would be needed here during that time. Her husband was killed in an accident during the time she had planned to be gone. During World War II, many would come to ask him about the fate of their beloved. He was also known to bilocate a few times, being seen 100’s of miles away when he was known to be in San Giovanni Rotondo.

He was, however, even more well known for 2 things that he had in common with St John Vianney. One was the “gift of reading souls.” Padre Pio, like St John Vianney, would often know a person’s sins even if they had forgotten them or withheld them. Like Vianney, people flocked to Padre Pio for Confession. Another thing these two saints had in common was overt attacks by the demons.

There were also states of ecstasy when Padre Pio offered the Holy Sacrifice. At offertory and at the consecration he would become dead still for a period of time, like a rock. An old Msgr we had in seminary actually witnessed this firsthand. During Offertory, Padre Pio would often see souls in Purgatory who came to plead for his prayers, and at the consecration, He would see the Passion of our Lord.

Probably the thing that Padre Pio was most well known for, though, was carrying the full stigmata – the so-called 5 wounds of Christ. Jesus suffered many more than 5 wounds during His Passion but “the” 5 wounds refers to the 4 nail holes and the lance in His side. Padre Pio was given all 5 of these wounds while at San Giovanni Rotondo. These wounds not only caused him physical suffering, but interior suffering as well. He was investigated multiple times by the Church, denounced by some, and had his public life restricted several times. This was a great interior suffering for Padre Pio but he bore it with great patience and humility.

Padre Pio also continued to have visions of Jesus, Mary, and angels throughout his life. Having suffered much, he once asked our Lord why. Jesus told him: if I had not crucified you, you would have left Me. We are perhaps reminded of St Paul’s thorn in the flesh. The Lord wanted to do great things for modern man through Padre Pio. But He also wanted to save Padre Pio. What our Lord was telling him is that He couldn’t do one without the other; if Jesus had not permitted his sufferings, Padre Pio – *Padre Pio*, a man known for his great sanctity – would have grown proud and lost his own soul.

This very brief biography hardly scratches the surface of this saint, through whom our Lord worked so many incredible phenomena. Nonetheless, it is perhaps sufficient to lead us to one final question: why Padre Pio? Why did our Lord raise up such a saint in our times? Of course some caution has to be taken here – the Lord did not tell us explicitly why. But yet, it is perhaps not hard to put forth some very reasonable speculation on this question. In Padre Pio’s time, modern man had already begun a widespread rejection of God. The “philosophies” of the so-called Enlightenment had become popular mentalities, at least in the Western world, atheism was on the rise – all the smart people were atheists – churches were already becoming emptier and emptier, communism had swallowed up Eastern Europe, and much of the rest of the world was becoming more and more fascinated with socialism. The central question becomes: Is God even real? Is there a God and if so, does He really care? Our Lord answered, in part, with Padre Pio. With the many great signs performed through this humble Friar, our Lord is saying: I am here, God is real, come back to Me. If you know someone who is doubting or who may just be open to it, give them a good biography of Padre Pio. *God bless you. Fr Kuhn*