

St. Pio of Pietrelcina

BORN 1887; DIED 1968

PRIEST

FEAST DAY: SEPTEMBER 23

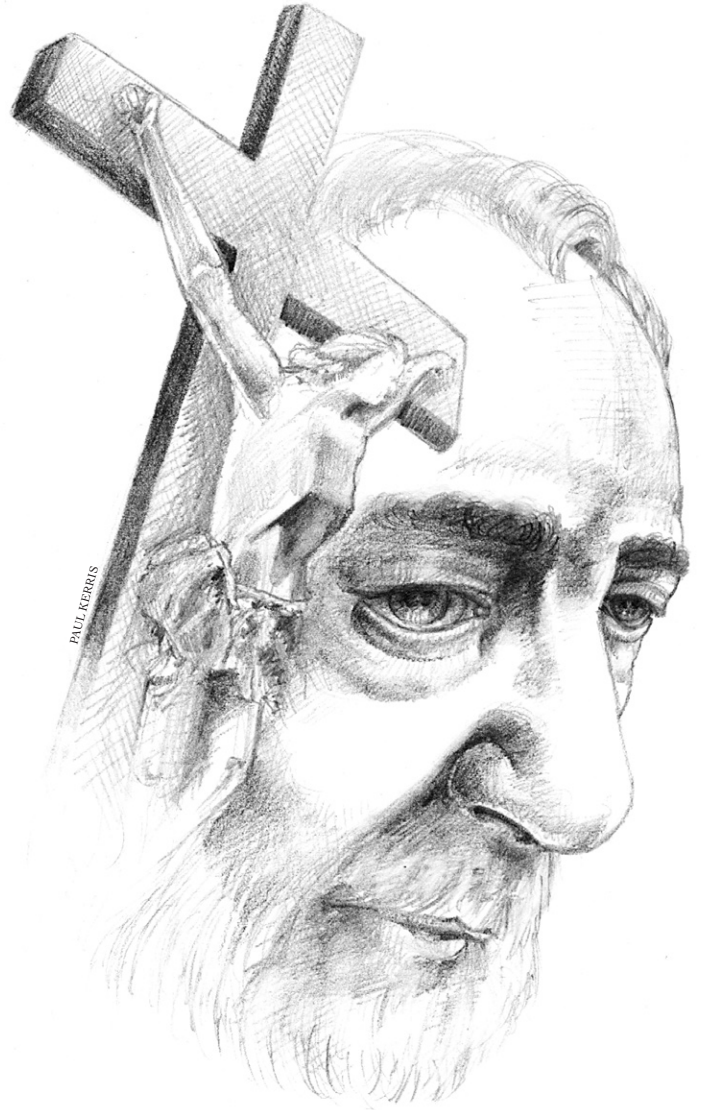
SAINTS ARE ALL FORMED in the image of Jesus, each in his or her unique way. A few are called to be especially visible icons of the Savior, their very life a call to conversion for all. St. Pio of Pietrelcina was one such saint.

Pio was born in the mountain village of Pietrelcina near Benevento, northeast of Naples, Italy. He was the fourth of three sons and four daughters (an older brother died in infancy and his older sister died at twenty months of age). Pio was an unusually devout child who stayed within the family circle because he found his playmates given to swearing and dishonesty. He also displayed an early inclination to charity, once coming home half-naked because he had given an especially nice new outfit to a poor child. He loved everything about celebrating

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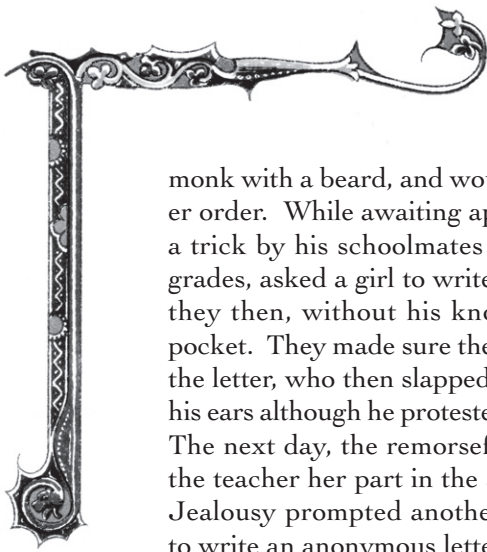
feasts, and was privileged to witness the healing of a deformed infant while on pilgrimage to a saint’s shrine with his father.

When Pio was five years old, he was alone in church when Jesus appeared to him in a vision. He beckoned Pio to approach and laid his hand on Pio’s head. From then, Pio sought to consecrate himself completely to God. Visions of Jesus and Mary occurred throughout his childhood and adolescence, and he thought that they were normal and that everyone had visions. Desiring to imitate Christ, throughout his childhood he slept on the floor instead of in bed, with a stone for his pillow, and also undertook other physical penances, to his mother’s dismay. Until he was twenty-five, he was also disturbed



by evil spirits in obscene human form or in the form of terrifying animals.

Pio experienced his first mystical ecstasy at fifteen, and it was then that he heard the call not only to the priesthood but also to religious life. He heard a voice commanding him: “Sanctify yourself and others.” Having once met a monk of the Capuchin order (a branch of the Franciscans that sought to live more completely the rule of total poverty), he felt called to be like him, a



monk with a beard, and would consider no other order. While awaiting approval, he suffered a trick by his schoolmates who, jealous of his grades, asked a girl to write a love letter which they then, without his knowledge, hid in his pocket. They made sure the teacher discovered the letter, who then slapped and hit Pio around his ears although he protested his ignorance.

The next day, the remorseful girl told the teacher her part in the scheme.

Jealousy prompted another boy to write an anonymous letter to the parish priest claiming that Pio was courting a local girl. The priest forbade Pio from further pursuing entry into the Capuchin novitiate until he satisfied himself that the letter-writer had lied. One final barrier to entry was intensification of the diabolical seductions he had been experiencing, this time to a life of pleasure in the world.

Four months before his sixteenth birthday, Pio entered the novitiate. Following its completion, he entered several years of study to lead to the priesthood. Although his initial desire for missionary work was not granted, almost exactly two years after he had begun religious life he had his first of many experiences of an extremely rare mystical phenomenon, bilocation (being in two places at once). In this case it was from a small town about sixty miles northeast of Naples to the city of Udine in the far northeast of Italy for the sake of a man dying without the sacraments and his newborn daughter. At eighteen, he began to suffer frequent illnesses, requiring him to be sent home to his family for a time. It seemed so likely that he would not live long that he was ordained nine months early, at age twenty-three, still living at home. He also remained subject to terrible Satanic temptations and attacks, including physical beatings, which further debilitated his health. But he also experienced numerous and lengthy Heavenly visions, and had a brief experience of the stigmata (the five wounds of

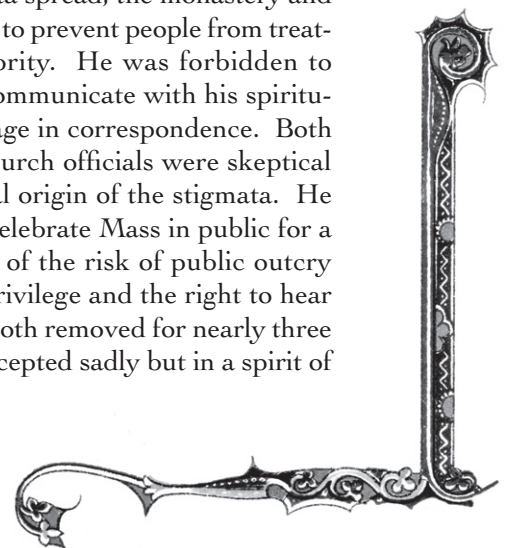
the crucified Jesus). He was too ill to return to community life until he was twenty-eight, although he was briefly called up to military service during World War I as a medic until physicians concluded that he was too ill to serve. It was during this period that he began a ministry of spiritual direction, and it appeared that the severity of the demonic attacks he experienced were in direct relation to the good he did others.

In 1916, at twenty-eight, Pio finally found a home in the Capuchin monastery of San Giovanni Rotondo, northeast of Foggia in the “spur” above the “heel” of Italy. His health improved markedly. He was called up again for military service in the middle of 1917, but he served as an orderly and janitor for only a month and a half before he was again sent away due to ill health. He was permanently discharged from the military in April 1918 and never left San Giovanni Rotondo again.

After some months of further intense physical suffering, accompanied by the spiritual desolation known as the “dark night of the soul,” Pio received the stigmata, the first priest ever known to have received this visible sign of Jesus’ crucifixion. His reaction was to attempt to conceal the wounds from embarrassment and anxiety. He bled for the remaining half-century of his life, with the wounds disappearing only on the day of his death. As news of his stigmata spread, the monastery and the Vatican sought to prevent people from treating him as a celebrity. He was forbidden to show his hands, communicate with his spiritual director, or engage in correspondence. Both physicians and Church officials were skeptical of the supernatural origin of the stigmata. He was permitted to celebrate Mass in public for a time only because of the risk of public outcry otherwise. This privilege and the right to hear confessions were both removed for nearly three years, which he accepted sadly but in a spirit of



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obedience. When his privileges were restored, his life centered on celebrating Mass, long hours in the confessional, and spiritual direction. His ministry was assisted by another mystical gift, that of the ability to read souls. He brought countless people to true repentance, including those whom he initially sent away without absolution because they were not truly remorseful for their sins.

Pio was deeply concerned for the physical as well as the spiritual suffering he saw. Several years after settling at San Giovanni Rotondo, he solicited contributions to establish a twenty-bed hospital nearby. In 1938 an earthquake irreparably damaged the building. World War II delayed replacing the facility, but a new three hundred-bed hospital, the *Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza* (“House for the Relief of Suffering”), built from a multitude of donations, was opened in 1956. Several miraculous healings are attributed to Pio as well.

During World War II, Pope Pius XII strongly urged the creation of prayer groups worldwide. Pio enthusiastically responded to this call and, under his sponsorship, hundreds of prayer groups sprang up throughout Italy and, eventually, spread to several nations in Europe and to the United States. He affiliated these groups to the *Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza* as well as to their local churches and dioceses. These groups engaged not only in prayer but also in works of Christian witness and evangelization, and thirty-five years after his death, membership exceeded half a million people worldwide.

Pio also developed other forms of the apostolate, from the very practical such as trade

schools for men and women, an old people’s home, an automotive-repair center, and a food cooperative, to those supporting and advancing the faith, including a school for children, a center for Franciscan culture, an outdoor Way of the Cross, and a convent for Capuchin nuns.

Spiritually mature while still a young man, Pio’s life of prayer and devotion deepened throughout the years. He focused his spiritual life on the Eucharist, spending hours daily in prayer before a tabernacle, and was also known for his love of Mary as his spiritual mother — his “Mamma” — and for the saints, the souls in Purgatory, and his guardian angel. He loved praying the rosary and always had a rosary in his hands. He ardently defended the Church during his own time of trial and, later, during the tremendous upheaval and distrust following the Second Vatican Council and the promulgation of Pope Paul VI’s encyclical *Humanae Vitae*.

Pio’s acceptance of suffering was total, but he often felt as though he was at a breaking point and could take no more. Yet his profound spiritual life and suffering, and the apostolate that consumed most of his waking hours, did not efface his joy and gaiety. He was known within his community as a wit and a mimic, and loved to make others laugh. He cherished companionship and friendship, stayed current with politics, social problems, and art, and enjoyed secular as well as sacred music.

Pio’s life was an extraordinary sign of God’s power and presence in the world. With St. Paul, he could say: “*I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me*” (Gal 2:20). Christ lived in him, and he profoundly revealed Christ to those around him.