

Padre Pio
25th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)
(Lk 16:1-13)

Francesco Forgione was born in 1887 in the small town of Pietrelcina in southern Italy, one of eight children in a poor but strongly religious family, who attended Mass and prayed the Rosary daily. In his youth he suffered many illnesses but also experienced visions and mystical prayer. By age 10 he knew he wanted to be a Franciscan Friar of the Capuchin order. In order to complete his education his father worked in the United States to earn money, and Francesco was able to enter the novitiate at age 15, taking the religious name “Pius.”

As a young Franciscan preparing for the priesthood, Pius experienced headaches and strange illnesses where he could not eat. He was often observed in a stupor, as if absent, and other friars observed him levitating off the ground. These were a continuation of the mystical experiences he had since his childhood.

After ordination, in 1916, he was sent to the small Capuchin Friary of San Giovanni Rotondo, where he stayed the rest of his life, and which is now a famous pilgrimage site. His parents and brother came to join him at the convent. He gained a reputation for being a holy friar, and many people sought him out for confession.

Padre Pio became a popular spiritual director. His five rules for holiness were: 1) weekly confession, 2) daily Communion, 3) spiritual reading, 4) meditation, and 5) examination of conscience.

After World War I, his spiritual gifts began to manifest more and more, which led to even greater numbers of penitents seeking him out. Padre Pio was observed by many people to have an abundance of unique spiritual gifts and charisms, including: gifts of healing, bilocation, levitation, prophecy, miracles, extraordinary abstinence from sleep and nourishment, the ability to read hearts, the gift of tongues, the gift of conversions, and stigmata.

Bilocation – The saint appeared in different locations when he was actually still in his convent. It happened especially when Padre Pio was asked to pray for someone who needed healing. The sick person, in another location, would see Padre Pio, and he himself could see the person, their room, and where they lived.

Levitation – As with other saints such as Teresa of Avila and Joseph of Cupertino, Padre Pio was witnessed to rise up in the air during certain times of intense mystical prayer.

Abstinence – Similar to St. Catherine of Siena, Padre Pio had difficulty eating earthly food. In one instance he subsisted for over 20 days only receiving the Holy Eucharist without any other nourishment.

Prophecy – In 1947 a young Polish priest visited Padre Pio and went to confession. The saint reportedly prophesied that Fr Wojtyla would rise to the highest place in the church.

Healings – As with the Lord, the most numerous miracles of Padre Pio were healings. In one incident a girl named Gemma was cured of blindness in 1947. In another famous miracle, Bishop Wojtyla wrote Padre Pio in 1962 on behalf of his friend Wanda Poltawska, who had cancer. She was spontaneously healed.

Stigmata – The most famous of his spiritual gifts, however, was the stigmata, the appearance in his own body of the wounds of Christ. This started in 1911 with red marks and intense pain in his hands and feet, and in 1918 with actual wounds in his side, hands, and feet, that bled.

Transverberation – The wound in the side is particularly important, because it actually pierced the heart. Several saints have experienced this wounding, which signifies a deep love and union with God in His suffering for the salvation of the world. Because of the tremendous devastation of World War I, Padre Pio offered himself to the Lord for an end to the war. In August of 1918 the Lord appeared to him and pierced his side, leaving him in agony for several weeks, as if suffering from a mortal wound. In September of that year the intense pain ended, and all five wounds of the stigmata appeared visibly on his body, remaining the next 50 years until the end of his life. Witnesses reported an intense perfume smell from the wounds. Padre Pio tried to hide them with mittens, and treat them with various medicines, to no avail. The wounds disappeared from his body shortly before his death.

In the course of his ministry, Padre Pio established a small clinic for pilgrims who were seriously ill, the “*Home for Relief of Suffering*.” This project eventually grew into a great and famous hospital that is still there today.

As happened with Jesus and many saints, when the Holy Spirit began to manifest through signs and miracles, envy and opposition reared its ugly head. In Jesus’ day it was the Pharisees and Sanhedrin; for Padre Pio it was the authorities of the Catholic Church. Starting in the 1920s he was forbidden by his superiors from saying public Mass, blessing people, answering letters, and showing his stigmata in public. When they tried to move him to a different convent the people rose up in protest. Padre Pio was subjected to repeated visits and humiliating

examinations by so-called experts who were often condescending and rude. Authorities spied upon Padre Pio, even placing listening devices in his cell and confessional.

He was falsely accused of having indecent relationships with women among his followers. He was accused of misappropriating funds for his hospital. He was accused of being a fascist. He was accused of faking or self-inflicting the wounds on his body. He endured it all with patience, obedience, and trust in God. The faithful never doubted his spiritual gifts, and the abundant healings and miracles through his intercession were real.

The hatred shown to Padre Pio, like Jesus, was diabolical. As his spiritual mission increased, so too did the attacks of the devil, who tormented him both physically and spiritually. Like St. John Vianney, Pio experienced physical combat in which he was left battered and bruised. Spiritually, the devil would continually lie, deceive, trick, and try to mislead Padre Pio, appearing to him as an angel of light, and laying traps for him with his superiors and brothers.

Starting in the 1930s, popes Pius XI and Pius XII began to trust him more, and allowed him to engage in ministry again. Future Pope John Paul II was an early pilgrim and disciple of the saint. Toward the end of his life, Padre Pio became very concerned about the destructive changes in the modern world: the dangers of media and television, immodest styles of clothing, the loss of reverence and religious life in the Church after Vatican II, and spreading of Pentecostal-style movements. Padre Pio died in 1968, at the age of 81, and was canonized by his great supporter, Pope John Paul II, in 2002. 100,000 attended his funeral, 300,000 attended his canonization.

In today's Parable of the Dishonest Steward, Jesus commends those disciples who can shrewdly use riches and worldly gifts for the benefit of others, and to gain the good graces of their master. Padre Pio was such a disciple, who by his upbringing and Franciscan calling shrugged off the allure of earthly wealth, and when he did receive donations, invested directly into projects that benefited the sick. He served one master only.

Moreover, Jesus said that to those who are trustworthy in the "small things," such as money, greater spiritual treasures will be given (Lk 16:10-11). God tests us with the handling of worldly treasure before entrusting us with real wealth. Saints such as Padre Pio were blessed with an abundance of heavenly gifts and supernatural abilities because they had been deeply and permanently purified of worldly attachments. Padre Pio and the great saints show us the way.

We need to understand that when Padre Pio was asked to pray for someone, he prayed like Christ who took upon himself the suffering of the world. He didn't

simply ask the Father to heal someone, he asked God to give him that person's suffering instead. Like the "dishonest steward" forgiving the debts of his master's clients, Pio would personally "pay" the burden of others whenever possible in order to please God. Having tasted the love of God in heaven in a very profound way, the saint was willing to suffer any hardship on earth, in union with Christ on the Cross. This is what explains his stigmata; they are the direct result of mystical prayer, by which the saint experiences a direct presence of God prior to death – and His judgment – which in turn leads to an intense effort on earth to do good, help others, and expiate sin. The saint is fully conformed to Christ, who gave himself as a sacrifice on the Cross.

"Pray, hope, and don't worry." – Padre Pio