

THE HOME FOR THE RELIEF OF SUFFERING

By Fr. Anthony J. Cipolla

Blessed Padre Pio was a victim priest who would rather suffer than to see people suffer. His mission was to bring souls to Christ and help people to understand that suffering is for the *purification of the soul*. He saw the tremendous need for a hospital in the Gargano region to serve the needs of the sick and handicapped people. He was very determined to build a hospital. He began to think about this project when he was young. Some people have said that Jesus Himself commissioned him to do this project during a mystical vision.

At the time there was not one hospital in the entire region. The closest hospital to San Giovanni Rotondo was in Foggia. To get there people had to travel twenty-five miles on roads that were impassable, using the most primitive means of transportation.

In January of 1920, Padre Pio turned the old convent of the Poor Clares in the center of San Giovanni Rotondo into a small but functional hospital with two wards, twenty beds, and an operating room with some basic equipment. It was called "San Francesco Hospital" named after St. Francis of Assisi. Various doctors who were friends of Padre Pio enthusiastically donated their services to the hospital, but eventually they were too overwhelmed to continue. In 1938 an earthquake that severely damaged the friary also destroyed San Francesco Hospital, forcing Padre Pio and several other friars to sleep in a trailer for several weeks; it rendered inoperable the thirteen-year old St. Francis Hospital. Padre Pio was not interested in having it renovated, however. It was too small and inadequate, and he had greater plans in mind.

A hospital was very much needed in the area for the numerous people that were sick. Padre Pio relied totally on Divine Providence on how the hospital was going to be built, where the funds would come from, and whom the medical doctors and nurses would be. He knew that God knows that the hospital was needed, and trusted that He would provide. His idea of a hospital however, was more of a "*Home for the Relief of Suffering*." He perceived the hospital as his "Cathedral of Charity", a place where people could come to be relieved of the pains of sin in their soul and the suffering of

their body due to sickness or physical pain. The hospital was "the apple of his eye".

Padre Pio named the hospital, "La Casa Sollevo Della Sofferenza", The Home for the Relief of Suffering". Padre Pio says, "If this work were merely an instrument for the relief of bodily suffering, it would only be a model clinic. But it must be a channel of God's Love through the call of charity. The suffering individual must here experience the love of God through the wise acceptance of His afflictions. The love of God should grow stronger in the soul of the sick person by virtue of the love of Jesus Crucified which emanates from those who aid the infirmity of the body and of his soul." ¹

Three doctors were instrumental in the construction of LA CASA. They were Dr. Guglielmo ("Willy") Sanquinetti from Florence, Dr. Mario Sanvico, from Perugia and Dr. Carlo Kiswarday, a pharmacist from Zara, Yugoslavia. Dr. Mario Sanvico once asked Padre Pio how he came up with such a peculiar name for the hospital. Padre Pio told him that he did not care for the word *hospital* or *clinic* or *institution*. For him, especially after his own experiences during the First World War, *hospital* meant a place of horror and suffering. What he envisioned, however was a place to *relieve* suffering, where science as well as religion combined to work for the soul as well as the body. The aim of *La Casa Sollevo Della Sofferenza* was as Padre Pio put it in a letter to Pope Pius XII,

"To introduce to the care of the sick a concept more profoundly humane and more supernatural, that places the sick in ideal conditions both from a material and spiritual point of view, to the end that the patient might be led to recognize those working for his cure as God's helpers, engaged in preparing the way for the intervention of grace."²

Padre Pio was a man of suffering. His entire life was a life of continual suffering and sickness, accompanied by moral and spiritual trials that challenged his soul. Physically he was crucified for fifty years; spiritually he was crucified for his entire earthly existence. In the book *PADRE PIO MAN OF HOPE*, the author, Renzo Allegri adequately and beautifully describes Padre Pio's priestly ministry: "Padre Pio was a "Doctor" of

¹ Alimenti, Dante, *PADRE PIO*, by Editrice Velar, Impirex International Limited, (1984) Dublin, Ireland., p. 138

² Ruffin, C. Bernard, *Padre Pio: The True Story*, Our Sunday Visitor, (1982), Huntington, Indiana., p. 224

Suffering." He exercised his mission in the confessional, where he spent as many as eighteen or nineteen hours a day, healing spiritual illnesses. He also exercised his mission by constructing a large hospital *La casa Sollievo Della Sofferenza*, The Home for the Relief of Suffering."

Padre Pio experienced health problems throughout his life. He had asthmatic problems, bronchial problems and stomach problems. He could hardly keep food down yet, he ate very little. His doctor said that a baby would not be able to survive on the amount of food that he consumed. His temperatures rose 118 degrees to 120 degrees on an extremely accurate thermometer. Once his temperature was so high that the glass of a thermometer broke and the mercury poured out. This thermometer still exists today and can be seen. He bled the stigmata of the five wounds of Christ Crucified that he received on September 20th, 1918. He bled a pint of blood a day and the bandages had to be changed about 30 times during the day. He was in constant excruciating pain. Once a curious journalist asked Padre Pio, "Tell me Padre, do those wounds hurt?" Padre Pio responded, "Well, the Lord did not give them to me for decorations."

Padre Pio was familiar with health care when he served as a medic in the military during World War I. As a priest he knew that prayer and confession was the best *medicine* for both the body and the soul. He prayed for people who came to him with various sicknesses, diseases and handicaps and many people were cured. At the beginning of the 1920's, thousands of sick people began to arrive in San Giovanni Rotondo seeking miraculous cures after they heard about Padre Pio's stigmata. Padre Pio knew that he was not able to help everyone, so he decided to provide as much relief as he could for their suffering with adequate medical care. This medical care would be performed out of deep Christian love.

Padre Pio met countless people with all sorts of physical sicknesses, handicaps and ailments who came to him seeking cures. There were blind people, lame, mute and deaf. Hundreds of people claimed cures due to the famed Capuchin, Padre Pio's prayers for them. When they would return to the monastery to thank Padre Pio for their cure and good health to Padre Pio, he would say, "Don't thank me, thank Our Lord and Our Lady." There were some people who were not cured.

The need for sick people to go to qualified doctors whom God blessed with the knowledge of medical science was essential, and a hospital to help relieve suffering and bring people back to good health was indispensable.

Many sick and handicapped people came to be cured by Padre Pio's prayers and to be touched by his stigmatized hands on their head. But he was more of a "*Doctor of Souls*" and wanted to touch their hearts to repent of their sins and return to the Lord. His *medicine* was "Confession". Padre Pio regarded Sin as the greatest sickness even more than physical sickness. People often said that it was like going through '*Divine Surgery*' when one went to confess to him because he could read the souls of his penitents, and very often told them their sins, even the day they committed them. He was sometimes very brusque with penitents not properly disposed. When he was questioned about his being brusque he replied: "*one does not give sweets to someone who needs a laxative.*"

There were however, incredible physical cures such as that of Gemma DiGiorgi, a young girl from Ribera, Sicily who has no pupils in her eyes. Gemma was born without pupils in her eyes. But in 1947, at the age of 7, she was cured. She visited Padre Pio with her grandmother. Her grandmother asked Padre Pio to pray for this grace that Gemma would be able to see. She said that Gemma was crying, because after her confession with Padre Pio she forgot to ask that he pray for her to regain her vision. Padre Pio gave Gemma her First Holy Communion. He blessed Gemma and made the sign of the cross over both of Gemma's eyes. When Gemma returned to Sicily, her grandmother took her to an eye specialist to have her eyes examined, who declared her blind. Yet, she sees perfect, even though it is anatomically impossible to see without pupils in our eyes. This totally astonished the eye specialist and the medical profession.

Throughout the years, there were hundreds of people coming to San Giovanni Rotondo, or writing to the monastery, claiming physical cures through the intercession of Padre Pio from their illness or handicaps.

After he died on September 23, 1968, and shortly after, when his cause of beatification was admitted by the church, it was necessary for a miracle to occur after his death through his intercession to determine beatification. There were several that followed. The Sacred Congregation for the Causes of

Saints accepted the miraculous healing of Mrs. Consiglia De Martino, a married woman with three children who lives in Salerno, Italy.

On October 31, 1995, Mrs. De Martino began to feel a heavy pain in her chest and stomach, as though her insides were being torn away. Finally, a painful swelling developed in her neck that already formed a lump the size of a grapefruit. Frightened, she and her sister went immediately to the hospital where, after two CAT scans, the doctors diagnosed a diffuse lymphatic spilling of approximately two liters caused by the rupture of the lymphatic canals. Even though surgery was advised Mrs. De Martino decided to wait.

Mrs. De Martino, a member of one of Padre Pio Prayer Groups made a pilgrimage to pray at Padre Pio's tomb. She also asked Brother Modestino Fucci, who had known Padre Pio personally, to ask for his intercession. Brother Modestino went immediately to Padre Pio's tomb to pray. He was sure that Padre Pio would intercede because Padre Pio had promised him as much during their time together at the monastery.

On November 2, there was a reduction in the fluid deposit in Mrs. De Martino's neck, as well as marked reduction in the pain. Mrs. De Martino was given a clean bill of health after a series of X-rays and examinations. There was no unusual liquid in her system, the swelling in her neck disappeared and there was absolutely no more pain.

On April 30, 1998, a committee of medical experts announced the *"extraordinary and scientifically inexplicable nature"* of Mrs. De Martino's cure. On December 21, 1998, in the presence of Pope John Paul II, the decree of the miracle was promulgated, thereby opening up the way for Padre Pio's beatification. On Sunday, May 2, 1999 Pope John Paul II beatified Padre Pio. There were an estimated 300,000 people gathered at St. Peter's square for a solemn Mass at which Pope John Paul II declared Padre Pio, Blessed Padre Pio. I was privileged to attend Padre Pio's beatification on an invited pilgrimage, and fortunately was seated up front on the right side of the basilica, amid the throngs of people.

Blessed Padre Pio's mission was to bring men/women in union with God. He was like the Doctor of Calvary freeing mankind from the evils of sin and the loss of their soul, so that they could have everlasting life, peace and happiness. Our Blessed Lord said: *"Fear not those who destroy the body, rather fear those who destroy the body and the soul."* (Mt. 19:28).

Padre Pio could not stand to see anyone suffer, he would much rather take upon his or her sufferings and unite them to the sufferings of Jesus. In the book of Colossians. Chapter 1: 24-26 St. Paul experienced physical suffering, and fittingly describes the need for suffering for others and ourselves.

St. Paul says, *"Now, I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of His body that is, the church, of which I became a minister according to the divine office which was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now made manifest to the saints."*

Blessed Padre Pio offered himself as a victim for sinners. In a letter to his Spiritual Director we read these beautiful, inspiring and touching words:

"I want to ask your permission for something. For some time past I have felt the need to offer myself to the Lord as a victim for poor sinners and for the poor souls in purgatory."

"This desire has been growing continually in my heart so that it has now become what I would call a strong passion. I have in fact made this offering to the Lord several times, beseeching Him to pour out upon me the punishments prepared for sinners and for the souls in the state of purgation, even increasing them a hundredfold for me, as long as He converts and saves sinners and quickly admits to paradise the souls in Purgatory, but I should like now to make this offering to the Lord in obedience to you. It seems to me that Jesus really wants this."³

Blessed Padre Pio was indeed, a doctor of souls to all the penitents who came to be absolved of their sins and receive the grace of God.

On the top of the stairway to the hospital there is a beautiful statue commemorating Padre Pio bent over hearing the confession of a penitent. It is a constant reminder that *Confession is Good for the Soul*. This was Padre Pio's idea of genuine healing, that is when the soul of man is totally with God free from the defects the devil and sin. Thus, *La Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza, the Home for the Relief of Suffering* is

³ Pio, Padre, Letters. Vol. I, Edited by Melchiorre of Pobladora and Alessandro of Ripabottoni, English Version, edited by Fr. Gerardo Di Flumeri, O.F.M.Cap., (1980) Our Lady of Grace Friary, San Giovanni Rotondo, Foggia, Italy, . p. 234.

a threshold for the spiritual, physical and emotional welfare of mankind. It is a home to restore good health by relieving pain and physical suffering; a home to strengthen mankind from the constant disturbances, torment and turmoil of his/her mind and soul; a home to give mankind courage, and bring about peace and happiness to his mind and soul. The '*Home for the Relief of Suffering*' was inaugurated on May 5, 1956. It now has 1,200 beds and is one of the best modern, up to date, and well-equipped hospitals that can care for every human sickness, disease and handicap in all of Italy and Europe.

There will always be sufferings in life, but La Casa will always be a *HOME FOR THE RELIEF OF SUFFERING*.
