

Moreover the great works he left us are signs of his profound missionary spirit. These works are also a demonstration of his sociability: he was not a mystic. He was acutely aware of the suffering of mankind and his great desire was to alleviate it. Padre Pio could not remain passive in front of human suffering: he felt he had to do something. The hospital is but one fruit of his concern, his charity. He involved prayer groups formed of people wishing to share his spiritual experience and so his missionary charity was immediately concretized.

What gift did Padre Pio bring to the Church?

FR. GONZALEZ: With Padre Pio the Church has been enriched in many ways. He helped thousands of people to renew their life as Christians, to rediscover their faith or to find it for the first time. In November 1922 he writes in his notes that he heard a voice saying "Be more holy and make others holy!" Moreover his life was lived within the Franciscan charisma. His consecration to Christ followed the charisma of Francis, an awareness which never left him. He also brought a strong new thrust to this Franciscan charisma, making it more vital and active in the Church.

As a missionary priest yourself, what have you learned from Padre Pio?

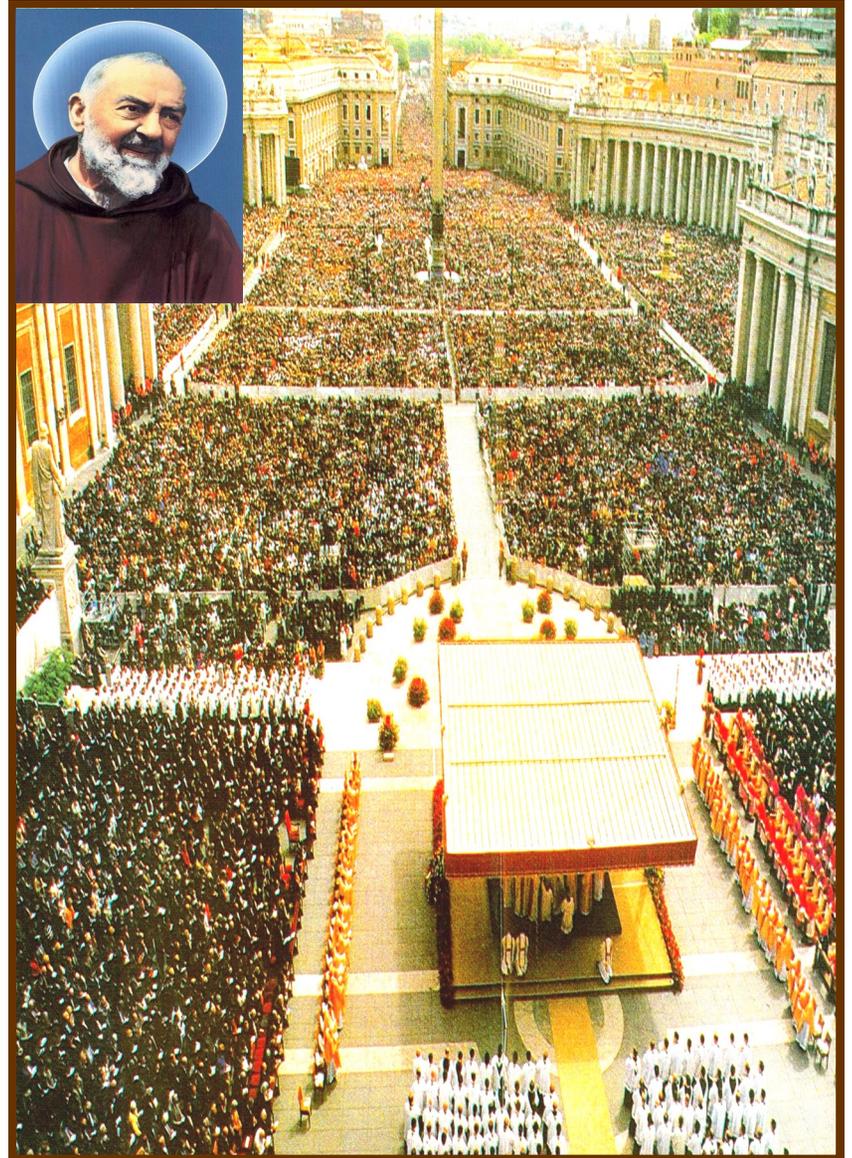


FR. GONZALEZ: I was struck by his total adhesion to the Passion, the love he showed in prayer with the Lord, his charity, love towards others, born of an experience of divine love. As a missionary I feel keenly his concern for the sufferings of the whole world, but also the harmony which the Holy Spirit breathed into his being: he lived a spiritual infancy, always a child, just like Saint Teresa, joyfully expectant of the Holy Spirit's surprises. I was also moved by the way he said Mass, by his gentleness in the

confessional. Both as a missionary and a priest, I have benefited from knowing Padre Pio. He strengthened my vocation, helping me to be a more committed priest, open to the whole Church. I approached him not only as a scholar, that was my task: drawing near to Padre Pio has been a special grace for my spiritual life, as a priest and as a missionary.

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Vatican Expert Reveals Secret of Padre Pio's Holiness



June 16, 2002 St. Peter's Square —
The Canonization of Saint Padre Pio

Vatican Expert Reveals Secret of Padre Pio's Holiness

Like Teresa de Lisieux, He Was Obsessed With Saving Souls

ROME, APR 29 (ZENIT).- Only days before the beatification of Padre Pio, Rome is beginning to come under siege by the thousands of groups converging on the Eternal City to be a part of this historic moment.

Conservative estimates expect at least half a million people but, on the street, most agree with Guido from Bologna who says: "at least a million, maybe more. Ain't been nothing like this since the times of St. Francis!" Perhaps. The fact is that even the government television station is suggesting that people stay home and watch it on TV so as not to overburden the already strained public transport system that is not-quite-ready for the enormous influx of pilgrims expected this weekend in Rome.

Of course, true to style, the Italians go about their business with little regard for "official" suggestions and are turning out from every corner of the country if only to be able to say "they were here." They are arriving in buses, campers, cars, trains, and planes, even an Italian pilgrimage on bicycles has added to the popular folklore sure to be remembered for years to come. Or at least until next year's Jubilee begins and shatters all previous records.

This weekend in Italy is shaping up to look like St. Patrick's Day in Ireland where the only two kinds of people are devotees of Padre Pio, and those who wish they were.

In order to better understand the person of Padre Pio, the Vatican news agency 'Fides' interviewed Fr Fidel Gonzales, Consultor of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, who has read 104 volumes of documentation on the life and work of this humble friar. Fr. Gonzales is a Comboni missionary who worked in Africa for 11 years and currently is professor of Church History at the Pontifical Urban University and the Pontifical Gregorian University.

Tell us about the holiness of Padre Pio.

FR. GONZALEZ: The life, work and virtues of a Saint are an expression of Christ's mystery. A Saint is a person who at a certain time in history reveals the face of Christ to those around him. Tommaso of Celano, who wrote a biography of Saint Francis of Assisi, writes in the prologue:

"Francis renewed the Church by showing that poverty and inner freedom are a path to holiness". The foundation of the Order was an extension in time and space of St Francis' charity. This also applies very well to Padre Pio: he was a "Franciscus redivivus," a new Saint Francis, gifted with the very same charisma. He brought the charisma of Saint Francis nearer to our day.

People were drawn to Padre Pio while he was alive and they still are, indeed even more since his death. In 1997, Pope Paul VI held him up as a model of holiness: "Look at his fame. Look at all the people from all over the world he gathered round him! Why? Was he a philosopher or a man of great wisdom, or a man of many means? ... Because he said Mass with deep humility, heard confessions from morning to night... because he was a man of prayer and of suffering!"

What would you say was at the heart of Padre Pio 's experience?

FR. GONZALEZ: A reflection by Cardinal Siri touches, I think, the nucleus of Padre Pio's charismatic experience: intimate sharing in the spiritual pain of Christ's passion. "It is in Our Lord's agony in the Garden -- the Cardinal writes -- that Padre Pio has the most profound and intimate spiritual experience (...) His mission was to renew Christ's Passion". This is the nucleus of Padre Pio's experience, found again and again in the documentation and in his writings.

Would you say Padre Pio was a missionary?

FR. GONZALEZ: His suffering itself had clearly a missionary dimension, since the suffering of Christ is a redeeming suffering, for the salvation of all mankind. Padre Pio was fully aware that through his physical and interior suffering he shared in Christ's saving mystery for the salvation of the world. He realized that he was completing the Lord's Passion for the good of the Church, as Saint Paul says: "I complete in my body what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ for his body, that is the Church". (Col 1,24). Indeed he was ever more aware of this as the years passed. On November 6th 1919 he wrote: "Poor me, I am exhausted and plunged into the deepest sadness, amidst the most profound anguish, not that I will never see my God, but that I will not be able to win all people for God". His one concern in life was the salvation of sinners. His whole life was centered on the fact that salvation is universal and must be communicated to all men and women.

Another missionary trait of his life was that he saw time, not as his own, but as belonging to others. He devoted himself entirely to encouraging and consoling other people. For many sinners Padre Pio was the embrace of Christ which is a new beginning. Although, like Saint Teresa the Little Flower, patroness of Missions, was never to go on mission, he participated in the mission of communicating salvation.