

A LEGACY of JOHN PAUL I

by JOHN M. HAFFERT



Last September 17th, Feast of the Stigmata of St. Francis, a Blue Army pilgrimage from the United States arrived at San Giovanni Rotondo, Italy, where Padre Pio is buried. A two-year visit of the Pilgrim Virgin throughout all of Italy was just about to begin.

A statue of Our Lady of Fatima had arrived by helicopter the night before from the Vatican. And the new pope, Pope John Paul I, had played a vital role in this Fatima pilgrimage for Italy.

Last year, after a two-hour interview with Lucia (sole survivor of the three children who saw Our Lady of Fatima) as Cardinal of Venice, the new Pope brought from Lucia the answer to a question asked by Fr. Mariano, O.F.M. Cap., as to whether such a pilgrimage to Italy would be pleasing to Our Lady. The reply was:

"Yes."

We remember twenty years earlier, when another helicopter came to San Giovanni Rotondo with the original Pilgrim Virgin statue which the Blue Army this past May carried triumphantly around the entire world.

"Russia will be converted when there is a Blue Army member for every Communist."

— Padre Pio

Padre Pio seemed to be dying. And thousands of pilgrims, at San Giovanni Rotondo to receive the Pilgrim Virgin, witnessed a most extraordinary event:

Padre Pio Cured

The helicopter had begun to fly away after the visit. Suddenly it whirled back, hovered near Padre Pio's monastery, and to the amazement of all, almost simultaneously Padre Pio appeared at the window and waved at the white image of the Madonna which seemed to have flown back to greet him! For even as the helicopter began to turn, Padre Pio suddenly felt strong and better and got up and moved towards the window to greet his "Mama"....

Special Privilege

From that day, for the ten years which followed Padre Pio was able to say his Mass daily until the very day of his death.

Now just ten years after Padre Pio's death, a helicopter came back with another Pilgrim Virgin, one which had been blessed at Fatima the previous August 13th specifically for a two-year tour of Italy under the auspices of the Padre Pio prayer groups...and due to the affirmative word which the new Pope John Paul had brought to the organizing committee after a two-hour visit with Lucia.

On that same night (the Feast of the Stigmata) following the Mass concelebrated by dozens of priests

and attended by great crowds, our small Blue Army group from the United States had a rare privilege.

Padre Alessio, who had been the close companion of Padre Pio during the last six years of his life, let us pray before the beautifully enthroned statue of Our Lady of Fatima in the Church of Our Lady of Graces. Then he took us down into the crypt and opened the very gate to Padre Pio's tomb, permitting us to enter and to pray on the tomb itself.

To Turn the Red Tide!

As I kissed the stone over the once-stigmatized body of our dear Spiritual Father, I was deeply conscious that he had accepted all Blue Army members (who keep their pledge) as his spiritual children. I prayed for all who bear the responsibility of extending the Blue Army throughout the world as I remembered the words of Padre Pio which I myself had heard from his lips now silenced on this earth but loud in eternity: "*Russia will be converted when there is a Blue Army member for every Communist.*"

May the two-year pilgrimage of Our Lady's statue in Italy on the tenth anniversary of Padre Pio's death...and in which the new Pope, also so soon to go to Heaven, played so significant a part...prove a turning point in the Apostolate of Fatima in Italy, especially in turning back the tide of Communism!