

I SAW THEM CLEAN HIS WOUNDS

by John Haffert

We all have our idea of a saint. I ought to have a better and clearer idea than the average person because I have been intimately acquainted with some famous, holy people of our time. I was once alone with Pope Pius XII; twice with Lucia (the only living one who saw Our Lady of Fatima); I was a close friend of the first Bishop of Fatima, known today as "The Bishop of Our Lady." And many, many more.

But Father Pio . . . when I first met him . . . was not what I expected. I thought he would be like the Cure of Ars (Saint John Vianney), or like Saint Francis. Or better: I thought he would be like what I *thought* the Cure of Ars and Saint Francis were like.

Fresh Blood

That first time, I went into the sacristy after Mass. I was right next to him as he took off his vestments. When he removed one glove, I saw the fresh blood running between his fingers. At that moment, he looked up and into my eyes. He seemed to be saying: "You know that where there is blood, the stigmata are authentic."

I would never be telling this were it not that I have read the other articles in this issue of *Catholic Traveler* and I am touched by the humility and sincerity of all the writers. So I don't mind if you think me a little "daft" as I affirm that

although Father Pio did not speak to me, I had the impression that the very clear thought that came to me was from him.

In any event, I was still unimpressed. I was too proud. I had been distracted during the Mass by the noisy crowd, and I left San Giovanni without much greater enthusiasm than when I had come.

Then, in 1954, I was with a pilgrimage conducted by Bishop Matthias Buchholz . . . one of the holiest men I have ever known. For two years, in a China prison, the Bishop was told each day that he was to be killed that day . . . and each day he suffered a dry martyrdom. It was the first Ave Maria Tour, and the faith of that wonderful Bishop was a greater benefit to those on that pilgrimage than all the Shrines they visited.

At San Giovanni, the Bishop was privileged to assist at Father Pio's

Mass, and later in the day when he told the pilgrims of his feelings I began to feel what so many other writers in this issue of *C.T.* express about Father Pio.

Tears came to the Bishop's eyes as he spoke. At the moment of consecration, the suffering of Padre Pio was so great that he (the Bishop) had all he could do to keep himself from stepping forth and supporting the bleeding stigmatist as he pronounced the words of Consecration. I realized then, as never before (as so many others testify) the depth of the mystery of this Holy Sacrifice which commemorated the sacrifice of Calvary and the mystery of the last Supper.

Unfortunately, these are things we cannot put well into words. What a blessing if some of the most wonderful things we have experienced could only be captured, on film or recording, to be of everlasting bene-



(Photo Giuseppe Vinelli)

fit to everyone! But it seems in the Providence of God that so many of these wonders are so personal.

Since 1954 I have seen Father Pio's Mass many times. Before the new church was built (what a blessing for the pilgrims!) I learned the folly of trying to beat the crowds to get near the altar. And I discovered that by getting into the confessional at the back of the church . . . the very confessional in which Father Pio spent long hours . . . that with powerful binoculars I could follow His Mass so closely that, with him, I could read the larger print of the missal! So far as I know, no one else ever thought of this and I was too selfish to reveal the secret . . . lest the confessional, like the rest of the church, be filled with sharp elbows.

In those days, Father Pio took two hours to say Mass. His ecstasies were apparent. And the two hours went like a few minutes.

Later the Superior ordered Father Pio not to take more than an hour, and that is precisely the time he takes now.

Like everyone who may have seen Father Pio even once, I could write much. How privileged I felt to have helped carry the statue of Our Lady of Fatima which now stands above his vesting table in the sacristy! And to have served his Mass! And to be part of the Blue Army, all members of which are his spiritual children!

But quite recently I was with a friend of Father Pio who took me into the monastery looking for him. The two of us were alone and learned that two of the monks were clean-

ing the wounds in Father Pio's feet and were not to be disturbed. To my surprise, the friend bustled right down the corridor and pushed open the door.

There in a room so poor that it amazed me (more like a root cellar than a monastery room), Father Pio was sitting on a little stool. The two priests were cleaning his wounds.

They were so surprised by this rude and unauthorized intrusion that I had ample time to take in the very private scene. And do you know what impressed me most?

Not the wounds. I knew about them. Not just the room . . . although I was surprised to see the monastery so poor, when the new hospital and church (built with money given to Father Pio) were so elaborate.

Sincerity

What impressed me most was the attitude of the two priests: their sincerity. There was *humility* in that dark, sparse little room. The most humble of all seemed Father Pio, although two of his fellow priests were kneeling and bathing his feet. The reverence was for *Christ* . . . the wounded, loving, real Christ who was God become man for love of us.

Both priests suddenly shouted at us for our rudeness and ordered us to close the door.

But I had been coming to ask Father Pio if he would receive in person a group of pilgrims I was leading (an Ave Maria tour), and word came that he would receive us. Everyone in the group was greeted



John Haffert serving Padre Pio's Mass

personally by him, and when he patted my saintly uncle (a Carmelite priest) fondly on the head, and chatted with me a moment, I was grateful.

If Father Pio were a fake, the priests in his community would have discovered it long, long ago. I suppose that is why their reverence, their faith, impressed me so much.

But one thing more:

Father Pio is so *obedient*.

The time we arrived with the statue of Our Lady of Fatima, the Superior brought Father Pio into the room, and Father Pio seemed a little reluctant to pass around and meet everyone. But in what seemed a quite gruff (and definitely authoritarian) tone, the Superior told Father Pio to pass down the line and greet each one, and Father Pio obeyed like a young novice . . . willingly and completely. He walked as though those wounds in his feet weren't there . . . although they are, and they hurt. And he spoke as though he didn't mind being the cynosure of all eyes, although he does.

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