

**“O God, who manifest your almighty power above all
by pardoning and showing mercy.”**

Opening Prayer of the Mass

A few days ago we celebrated the feast of St Pius of Pietrelcina, better known as Padre Pio. In 1918, at the age of thirty-one, Padre Pio experienced a moment of profound and prayerful silence, during which he saw a ‘mysterious person’ whose hands and feet were dripping with blood. As he came out of this mystical experience, he discovered that his *own* hands, and feet, and side were dripping with blood, and he was in pain. In his confusion and embarrassment, he tried to hide these wounds from others but very quickly it became obvious that something was amiss. And so began fifty long years of pain, anguish, embarrassment, and humiliation as he was both venerated as a living saint by some and ridiculed, mocked, and persecuted by others.

In fact, Padre Pio was not canonized because of the stigmata. He was canonized because of his heroic virtue, because of his being a model of what a priest and son of St Francis should be, and because of the miracles attributed to him during his lifetime and after his death. His bearing the stigmata – his carrying in his own flesh the same wounds that Christ bore on the Cross – did not make him a saint. Rather, it was the other way round. He was already a saint as a young priest and Franciscan before his body was marked with the wounds of Christ. These wounds were given to him in part as an outward sign of his interior holiness.

Each saint is given particular gifts – we call them *charisms* from the Greek meaning special favour or gift – and these charisms vary from saint to saint. In the first instance, these charisms are given to the individual saint as a sign of favour from God and for

the spiritual benefit of the saint himself. But the charisms are, in fact, given to the saints chiefly for the good of the wider Church. Just as stained-glass windows let the light of day flood into the church and bathe us all in light, so the charisms given to the saints allow the light of God to flood into His Church so that others may be bathed in God's grace. And so it is with Padre Pio.

Those of us who never met him (and he died only in 1968), or who have never been to San Giovanni Rotondo in Italy, or who, perhaps, have not yet been granted an answer from him to a particular prayer, are nevertheless greatly blessed to know *about* him, and to be able to take him as a model and pattern for our own lives, and draw blessings from the very fact that he bore the stigmata, the wounds of Christ, in his own flesh.

In our modern age, we have lost a sense of sin, even within the Church. We are so saturated with the idea of rights and entitlements that, consciously or otherwise, we have absorbed the idea of 'my truth,' and that what is right for me must be good, in and of itself. This way of thinking has led us all, to a greater or lesser extent, to think of ourselves as autonomous and independent from the need to follow the teachings of others. Even in the Church we have become used to marking out our own path and deciding for ourselves what is best. Many good Catholics have, in a very real sense, almost ceased to believe in the Church as a spiritual reality – and to see Her only as a human institution – leaving them free to choose for themselves what path to follow. As a result, we are all in danger of making our religion to be all about ourselves, instead of making it to be about God. We end up fashioning the Church according to our own image instead of allowing God to form us in His image through the graces that flow through His Church which He set up for this very purpose.

And this is why today's Second Reading is so important: 'Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though He was in the form of God, did not

count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, by taking the form of a servant... and humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death.'

This is what Padre Pio did. He humbled himself interiorly even during his childhood and young adulthood until he was deemed fit to receive such an astonishing gift that would mark his very flesh with the wounds of Christ Himself. So utterly conformed to the likeness of Christ was he that that likeness bore even an outward and physical resemblance. There was in Padre Pio's life no such thing as 'my truth.' He did not mark out his own path in life, or choose for himself what path to follow. He did not insist on his rights when even the Church authorities themselves placed constraints upon him. He so emptied himself of whatever he might have laid claim to that he became a viaduct, and gateway, of God's pardon and mercy as he sat in the box hearing people's Confessions and dispensing God's grace for anything up to twelve or fifteen hours each day.

Through Padre Pio's stigmata, we are reminded of what really matters in our religion, namely the power of God to forgive sins – to forgive our waywardness and pride that tells us we can follow *our own* path – and to cleanse souls. Truly, 'O God, [you] manifest your almighty power above all by pardoning and showing mercy.'