

Padre Pio: Wonderworker or Charlatan?

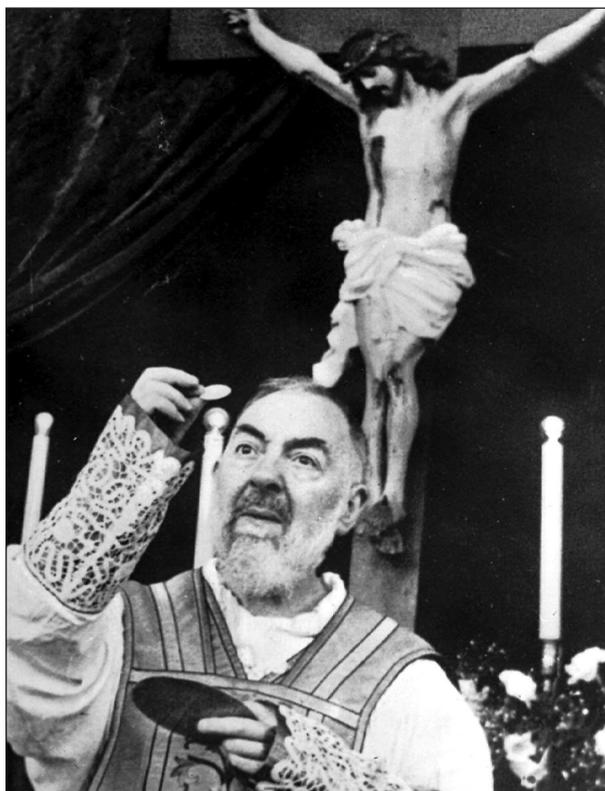
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Of the twentieth century's two most famous stigmatics (those who experience the supposedly supernatural wounds of Jesus), both Therese Neumann and Padre Pio were suspected of fraud, but Pio went on to sainthood and was canonized in 2002. In April 2008 his body was exhumed and put on display in a church crypt in San Giovanni Rotondo, Italy, a move that both attracted throngs of the credulous and provoked outrage among some Pio devotees. It also renewed questions about the genuineness of the stigmata and other phenomena associated with Pio.

A Capuchin Friar

Born Francesco Forgione on May 25, 1887, in the town of Pietrelcina, Pio grew up surrounded by superstitious beliefs and practices. His mother took him soon after birth to a fortune-teller to have his horoscope cast and at the age of two to a witch who attempted to cure an intestinal disorder by holding him upside down and chanting spells. As a boy he was tormented by nighttime “monsters,” and he conversed with Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and his guardian angel. He also had other mystical experiences (Ruffin 1982, 21–23, 79) that today are associated with a fantasy-prone personality.¹ He was “frequently ill and emotionally disturbed” and claimed he was often physically attacked by evil spirits (Wilson 1988, 88, 144).

In 1903, he entered The Order of Friars Minor, Capuchin—a conservative



This undated file photo shows Italian priest Padre Pio da Pietrelcina, the capuchin friar famed for his alleged, mysterious crucifixion wounds. AFP PHOTO/FILES [Photo via Newscom]

Catholic order that traces its origin to St. Francis of Assisi (1182–1226), the first stigmatic. The new initiate was called *Fra* (“Brother”) *Pio* (“Pious”), after the sixteenth-century pope, St. Pius V (Ruffin 1982, 35, 39). Pio continued to hear voices and experience visions, and in 1910 he began to experience the stigmata just after being ordained a priest.

As Padre Pio continued to exhibit the phenomenon, he began to attract a cult following. It was said he could look into people’s souls and, without them saying a word, know their sins. He could also allegedly experience “bilocation” (the ability to be in two places at

the same time), emit an “odor of sanctity,” tell the future, and effect miraculous cures (Wilkinson 2008; Rogo 1982, 98–100). Village hucksters sold his credulous disciples alleged Pio relics in the form of swatches of cloth daubed with chicken blood (Ruffin 1982, 153).

The local clergy accused Padre Pio’s friary of putting him on display in order to make money. They expressed skepticism about his purported gifts and suggested the stigmata were faked.

The Phenomena

The claims of Padre Pio’s mystical abilities are unproven, consisting of anecdotal evidence—a major source being the aptly named *Tales of Padre Pio* (McCaffery 1978). Pio’s touted psychic abilities seem no better substantiated than the discredited claims of the typical fortuneteller or medium (e.g., Nickell 2001, 122–127, 197–199). Many of his “bilocations” are analogous to Elvis Presley sightings, while some are—at best—consistent with hallucinations (such as one reported during a migraine attack or others occurring when the experiencer was near sleep or in some other altered state [McCaffery 1978, 24–36]). The reputed “odor of sanctity,” said Pio’s accusers, “was the result of self-administered *eau-de-cologne*” (“Pio” 2008).

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As to Pio's miraculous healings, they—like other such claims (Nickell 2001, 202–205)—are not based on positive evidence of the miraculous. Instead, the occurrences are merely held to be “medically inexplicable,” so claimants are engaging in the logical fallacy of arguing from ignorance (drawing a conclusion based on a lack of knowledge). Faith-healing claims often have alternative explanations, including misdiagnosis, psychosomatic conditions, spontaneous remissions, prior medical treatment, and other effects, including the body's own healing ability. Cases are complicated by poor investigation and even outright hoaxing. One man's claim of instant healing of a leg wound by Padre Pio, for example, was bogus; his doctor attested it “had, in fact, been healed for six months or more” (Ruffin 1982, 159).

But it is Pio's stigmata that have made him famous. Unfortunately, some examining physicians believed his lesions were superficial, but their inspections were made difficult by Pio's acting as if the wounds were exceedingly painful. Also, they were supposedly covered by “thick crusts” of blood. One distinguished pathologist sent by the Holy See noted that beyond the scabs was an absence of “any sign of edema, of penetration, or of redness, even when examined with a good magnifying glass.” Another concluded that the side “wound” *had not penetrated the skin at all* (Ruffin 1982, 147–148). Some thought Pio inflicted the wounds with acid or kept them open by continually drenching them in iodine (Ruffin 1982, 149–150; Moore 2007; Wilkinson 2008).

Nevertheless, some of the faithful were so intent on defending Pio that they made incredible claims. One was the insistence that the hand lesions, which skeptics thought were superficial injuries, were through-and-through wounds—“so much so,” insisted Pio's devoted family physician, that one could see light through them.” Of course, this is nonsense in view of authentic wounds in general and Pio's thickly blood-crusting ones in particular (Ruffin 1982, 146–147).

There were other problems with the “wounds,” including their location. Only the gospel of John (19:34) mentions the lance wound in Jesus' side, and John fails to specify which side. St. Francis' was on the right, whereas Padre Pio's was on the left. Also, witnesses described his side wound as in the shape of a cross; in other words, it had a stylized rather than realistic (lance-produced) form (Ruffin 1982, 145, 147).² Moreover, his wounds were in the hands rather than the wrists (some anatomists argue that nailed hands could not support the body of a crucified person and would tear away). When asked about this, Pio replied casually,

“For the first time in anyone's memory, [Padre Pio] did not attempt to hide his hands at any point in the service. To the amazement of everyone there, there was no trace of any wound.”

“Oh it would be too much to have them exactly as they were in the case of Christ” (Ruffin 1982, 145, 150). (One is reminded of Therese Neumann, whose “nail wounds” shifted from round to rectangular over time, presumably as she learned the true shape of Roman nails [Nickell 2001, 278].) Moreover, Padre Pio lacked wounds on the forehead (as from a crown of thorns [John 19:2]).

For years Pio wore fingerless gloves on his hands, perpetually concealing his wounds (Ruffin 1982, 148). His supporters regard this as an act of pious modesty. However, another interpretation is that the concealment was a shrewd strategy that eliminated the need for him to maintain his wounds. Before his death, frail, weary, with “rheumy eyes

seemingly fixed on another world,” Padre Pio celebrated Mass. According to Ruffin (1982, 305), “For the first time in anyone's memory, he did not attempt to hide his hands at any point in the service. To the amazement of everyone there, there was no trace of any wound.” At his death on September 23, 1968, his skin was unblemished.

So, were Padre Pio's phenomena genuine? Many other stigmatics—like Magdalena de la Cruz in 1543—confessed to faking stigmata. Maria de la Visitacion, the “holy nun of Lisbon,” was caught painting fake wounds on her hands in 1587. Pope Pius IX himself privately branded as a fraud Palma Maria Matarelli (1825–1888), insisting that “she has befooled a whole crowd of pious and credulous souls.” Suspiciously, under surveillance, Therese Neumann (1898–1962) produced actual blood flows only when the phenomenon was “hidden from observation.” And as recently as 1984, stigmatic Gigliola Giorgini was convicted of fraud by an Italian court (Wilson 1988, 26–27, 42, 53, 147).

Even a defender of Padre Pio's stigmata, C. Bernard Ruffin (1982, 145), admits, “For every genuine stigmatic, whether holy or hysterical, saintly or satanic, there are at least two whose wounds are self-inflicted.” Catholic scholar Herbert Thurston (1952, 100) found no acceptable case after St. Francis of Assisi. Thurston believed the phenomenon was due to suggestion, but Padre Pio himself responded to such theorizers: “Go out to the fields and look very closely at a bull. Concentrate on him with all your might. Do this and see if horns grow on your head!” (qtd. in Ruffin 1982, 150). As for St. Francis, his extraordinary zeal to imitate Jesus may have led him to engage in a pious deception (Nickell 2001, 276–283).

Canonization

Not only was Padre Pio accused of inducing his stigmata with acid, he was also alleged to have misused funds and to have had sex with female parishioners—in the confessional. The founder of the Catholic university hospital in Rome branded Pio

“an ignorant and self-mutilating psychopath who exploited people’s credulity” (“Pio” 2008).

The faithful were undeterred, however, and after Pio’s death there arose a popular movement to make him a saint. Pope John Paul II—whose papacy sped up the process of canonization and proclaimed more saints than any other in history (Grossman 2002)—heard the entreaties. Pio was beatified in 1999. On June 16, 2002, he was canonized as Saint Pio of Pietrelcina, but not before at least two statues of him wept in anticipation. Unfortunately, the bloody tears on one turned out to have been faked (a drug addict used a syringe to apply trickles of his own blood), and a whitish film on one eye of the other was determined to have been insect secretion (“Crying” 2002).

Interestingly, neither of the two proclaimed miracles of Pio (one used for his beatification, the other for canonization) involved stigmata. Instead, they were healings, assumed miraculous because they were determined to be medically inexplicable. In short, the Church never affirmed Pio’s stigmata as miraculous.

Of course, not everyone was happy with the canonization of Pio. Historian Sergio Luzzatto wrote a critical biography of Pio called *The Other Christ*. Luzzatto cited the testimony of a pharmacist recorded in a document in the Vatican’s archive. Maria De Viot wrote: “I was an admirer of Padre Pio and I met him for the first time on 31 July 1919.” She revealed, “Padre Pio called me to him in complete secrecy and telling me not to tell his fellow brothers, he gave me personally an empty bottle, and asked if I would act as a chauffeur to transport it back from Foggia to San Giovanni Rotondo with four grams of pure carbolic acid” (Moore 2007). But if the acid was for disinfecting syringes, as Pio had alleged to the pharmacist, why the secrecy? And why did Pio need non-diluted acid?

Investigation shows the timing of this reported incident is significant. The previous September, Pio and some of the other friars at San Giovanni Rotondo were administering injections to boys who were ill with influenza. Alcohol not being

available, an exhausted doctor left carbolic acid to be used for sterilizing needles and injection sites, while neglecting to tell the friars it had to be diluted. As a result, Pio and another friar were left with “angry red spots” on their hands. When Pio was subsequently alleged to have exhibited stigmata, the other friar at first thought the wounds were from the carbolic acid. Although Pio allegedly exhibited stigmata on his hands as early as 1910, the “permanent” stigmata appeared, apparently, not long after the carbolic-acid misuse (Ruffin 1982, 69–71, 138–143).

Sergio Luzzatto drew anger for publicizing the pharmacist’s testimony. The Catholic Anti-Defamation League accused the historian of “spreading anti-Catholic libels,” and the League’s president sniffed, “We would like to remind Mr. Luzzatto that according to Catholic doctrine, canonisation carries with it papal infallibility” (Moore 2007).

Exhumation

Forty years after the death of Padre Pio in 1968, his remains were exhumed from their crypt beneath a church in San Giovanni Rotondo. The intention of church officials was to renew reverence and so boost a flagging economy. Padre Pio, explained the *Los Angeles Times*, is “big business” (Wilkinson 2008).

No doubt many anticipated that the saint’s body would be found incorrupt. The superstitious believe that the absence of decay in a corpse is miraculous and a sign of sanctity (Cruz 1977). In fact, under favorable conditions even an unembalmed body can become mummified. Dessication may result from interment in a dry tomb or catycomb. Conversely, perpetually wet conditions may cause the body’s fat to form a soaplike substance known as “grave wax”; subsequently, the body may take on the leathery effect of mummification (Nickell 2001, 49).

Alas, Pio’s body, despite embalment (by injections of formalin), was only in “fair condition.” So that it could be displayed, a London wax museum was commissioned to fashion a lifelike silicon mask of Pio, complete with his full beard and bushy

eyebrows. The “cosmetically enhanced corpse” went on display April 24, 2008, in a glass-and-marble coffin (where it is to repose until the end of September 2009) “amid weeping devotees and eager souvenir-hawkers” (Wilkinson 2008; “Pio” 2008). For those who wonder: no, there is no visible trace of stigmata.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. For a discussion of fantasy proneness, see Nickell 2001, 84–85, 298–299.
2. The three-inch side wound was seen relatively rarely and, although “most witnesses” said it was cruciform, others described it as being “a clean cut parallel to the ribs” (Ruffin 1982, 147).

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