

DAY 1

Every Day Is Advent

All of the feasts of the Church are beautiful . . . but Christmas has a tenderness, a childlike sweetness that captivates my entire heart!

—Padre Pio

In the heart of Padre Pio, every day was a kind of Advent. His simple, prayerful joy was rooted in the hope that he would one day be with Jesus and Mary in paradise. It was a hope that stayed with him no matter how much he suffered. And he suffered a great deal! People sometimes say that Padre Pio looked stern or angry in his photographs. Yet as those who knew him would often say, he never lost his childlike love for Jesus and his mother.

As we begin this journey through Advent with Padre Pio, let me introduce you to my dear friend Ray Ewen, who got to know the Capuchin friar and mystic while stationed near San Giovanni Rotundo during World War II. Seven times Ray served at Mass with Padre Pio in his chapel and witnessed Padre Pio's extraordinary spiritual gifts. Years later, I had the great pleasure of going with

Ray first to Padre Pio's beatification and later to the canonization in Rome.

Shortly after the canonization, Ray and I went to San Giovanni Rotondo to visit Padre Pio's home and the chapel in the old church of Santa Maria delle Grazie. The church and monastery date back to the sixteenth century. Near this chapel stands Padre Pio's private confessional. Numerous miracles took place in that confessional, where Padre Pio read the hearts of penitents and guided them to make a full confession. Many tears were shed, and most were tears of joy!

As we were leaving the chapel, I asked Ray what came to mind as he stood inside the chapel where he had so often seen Padre Pio serving on the altar. Ray looked at me and said, "The last time I saw him, before returning to the US, I remember thinking, *The next time I see him will be in paradise.*" As he recalled this thought, Ray had tears in his eyes.

Many years would pass before Padre Pio's death in 1968. Yet Ray never forgot that moment of seeing that holy man on the altar and having the sense that he was in the presence of a man waiting to be called home. Years later, Ray was called home as well, holding fast to his hope of heaven just as Padre Pio did. I have no doubt Padre Pio was waiting for Ray when he arrived at the gates of paradise. May we all never lose sight of that great hope—the great hope that was born the day Love became incarnate in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Read

In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary. And coming to her, he said, "Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

—Luke 1:26–29

Reflect

May the Sweetest Child Jesus bring you all the graces, all the blessings, all the smiles that appeal to his infinite goodness.

—Padre Pio

During Advent, we return to the annunciation, the moment when Our Lady learns she is to be the mother of the Savior of the world. Take a few moments to ponder this great mystery, of the infant King who longs to live within your heart.

Advent is a time to reflect on the spiritual graces God sends to all of us—not the miraculous, extraordinary signs like healings and reading of hearts, such as those Padre Pio experienced, but the simple signs of the Spirit's presence in our lives. For which of those graces are you most thankful right now?

The gifts of Padre Pio were always used not to draw attention to himself but to draw his beloved sons and daughters closer to Jesus. How are you using your gifts to bless those around you?

Let Us Pray

Padre Pio, we pray you will stay close to us on this journey. We pray that we will arrive at Bethlehem with hearts full of hope, peace, joy, and love for the child Jesus!

Conclude your time of reflection and prayer with one Our Father, one Hail Mary, and one Glory Be.

DAY 2

Carry Jesus in Your Heart

Let us be very grateful to the Madonna because it is she who gave us Jesus.

—Padre Pio

On numerous occasions I've walked along the corridors of the convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie. The silence of the corridors echoes the spirit of Padre Pio. I could sense his presence in every step along the path that Padre Pio would have followed to the choir loft and into the church of Santa Maria delle Grazie. If you close your eyes, you can imagine what it must have been like on those evenings when Padre Pio walked these corridors. He was on fire with the love of the Lord. And at Christmastime, he glowed with the love of the child Jesus. The light that encompassed his body held within it the precious Christ Child. The child glowed with love for Padre Pio—a love that Padre Pio knew from a very young age and that Jesus shared with Padre Pio from his childhood.

Fr. Raffaele da Sant'Elia, who had the room next to Padre Pio for thirty-five years at the convent, was an

eyewitness to a beautiful miracle in this corridor. He fondly recounts it for us:

I had got up to go to the church for the Midnight Mass of 1924. The corridor was huge and dark, and the only illumination was the flame of a small oil lamp. Through the shadows I could see that Padre Pio, too, was making his way to the church. He had left his room and was making his way slowly along the corridor. I realized he was swathed in a band of light. I took a better look and saw that he had the baby Jesus in his arms. I just stood there, transfixed, in the doorway of my room and fell to my knees. Padre Pio passed by, all aglow. He didn't even notice I was there.⁴

Padre Pio's love for the child Jesus was almost childlike. The joy of Christmas stayed with him throughout the year and sustained him in his time of suffering. When we think of Padre Pio, we think of his stigmata and how he suffered for Jesus. But before the suffering, there was much joy. Through Our Lady, who never left his side, Padre Pio learned to love the child Jesus even as a very young child, when he was first able to communicate with Jesus and Mary. Padre Pio's love for Christmas grew out of the love he felt for Jesus—a great love that produced many spiritual and mystical fruits that blessed thousands of people, always bringing them closer to Jesus, just as Mary did.

Read

Then the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

—Luke 1:30–33

Reflect

Far into the night, at the coldest time of the year, in a chilly grotto, more suitable for a flock of beasts than for humans, the promised Messiah—Jesus—the Savior of mankind, comes into the world in the fullness of time.

—Padre Pio

Today we reflect on the childlike innocence of Padre Pio. Never did it leave him. Just the thought of the child Jesus made him smile. To Padre Pio, each Christmas was a rebirth. A new beginning. Like Padre Pio, let our spirits be born again to a new life this Advent. Let us ask the Lord to come into our hearts and embrace us all with his heavenly blessings. And let us ask Our Lady to remain at our side as she remained at Padre Pio’s side in very difficult moments.

Let us pray for our families, especially our children, on this journey to Bethlehem. May St. Joseph watch over our families and ask the Lord to protect them as he protected Our Lady on their journey to Bethlehem.

Let Us Pray

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Conclude your time of reflection and prayer with one Our Father, one Hail Mary, and one Glory Be.

DAY 3

Look for the Christ Child

May the child Jesus fill you with his divine charisma, make you experience the joys of the shepherds and the angels and fully bestow on you all the fire of that love which he made himself the least among us, and make you become a small child full of amiability, simplicity, love.

—Padre Pio

Summers in San Giovanni Rotondo can be very humid. Behind the old church of Santa Maria delle Grazie there is a beautiful garden where Padre Pio would lunch when the weather was warm. On pilgrimage, I and the pilgrims who traveled with me always stopped in the garden to meet with Fr. Ermelindo Di Capua, who blessed us with Padre Pio's glove and shared with us beautiful memories of Padre Pio.

Yesterday's reflection told the story of Padre Pio carrying the infant Jesus. Yet this was not an isolated incident. Many of Fr. Ermelindo's memories were of Padre Pio embracing the child Jesus. There was nothing in life Padre Pio loved more than the child Jesus. Padre Pio's

face would glow as he held the apparition in his arms! On many occasions, people witnessed the child Jesus appear in Padre Pio's arms. The Capuchins who lived with Padre Pio had the great privilege of seeing many of these apparitions. Fr. Raffaele recorded one of these apparitions in a manuscript:

During the night of the 19th and 20th [September 1919] I could not sleep. I do not know why . . . perhaps it was because of the heat. Around midnight, I got up from my bed. I felt almost frightened. The hall was dark, broken only by the flickering light of a kerosene lamp. While I was in the doorway about to go out, Padre Pio passed by all radiant, with the child Jesus in his arms, walking slowly and praying. He passed in front of me, all radiant with light and he did not notice me. Only some years later, I came to know that, that 20th of September was the first anniversary of Padre Pio's stigmata.⁵

This miracle was not always clearly visible to those nearby; Padre Pio would at times be seen with his arms folded as though he were holding something. Many Capuchins received special graces from God by witnessing Padre Pio walking in ecstasy, appearing to be holding something invisible to the viewer in his arms. Can you imagine witnessing this, knowing that the child Jesus is in the arms of Padre Pio even though he is not visible?

We hold the child Jesus in our hearts and feel the ecstasy of his presence every time we receive him in Holy