

On Monday, we heard the account of the Apostle Matthew who was called as an adult to leave everything behind to follow Jesus. Matthew was a bit surprised and probably thought Jesus meant to call someone more worthy.

Today is the Memorial of Padre Pio. Born on May 25, 1887, Francesco Forgione of Pietrelcina was raised in a rural area of southern Italy. His parents were peasant farmers and very devout in the practice of the faith. At the age of 5, little Francesco already knew that he wanted to dedicate his life to God.

Jesus the Good Shepherd often spoke of the shepherd who goes in search of the lost sheep. As a young boy, Francesco tended sheep and had a lot of quiet time to ponder his future. When most children are beginning school, he was out in the fields tending to the flock. Without that early foundation in education, he fell behind academically. He wanted to enter religious life, but before that could happen, he needed private tutoring to catch up on his missed education. He put his best efforts forward and was able to close the gap in order to become a Capuchin Franciscan Friar.ⁱ He took the religious name of Pio.

The Capuchin's live a life of extreme poverty living as closely as possible to the ideals of Saint Francis of Assisi. You may recall, Saint Anthony of Padua simplified the rigors of Francis to reach out to a broader range of followers for the Order of Friars Minor. However, the Capuchins felt the original strict discipline of Francis of Assisi was the better way to go. This resonated with Francesco who even as a child embraced penitential practices. "Penitential practices take many forms: apologizing to an injured party, healing divisions within our families, fasting... or graciously accepting the menial tasks of life. The purpose ... is not to diminish life but to enrich it."ⁱⁱ

Jesus calls us to pick up our cross and follow him. This often entails great hardship and suffering. Brother Pio lived with very serious illness as he studied for ordination as a priest. Drafted into the Italian Army as a private for World War I, he served as a medic but had to take multiple leaves of absence due to his poor health. He was discharged from the Army in March of 1918 but continued to suffer throughout his life.

As a priest, open wounds developed on his hands and feet and side. The wounds, stigmata, matched the wounds of our crucified savior. They appeared September 20, 1918 and lasted for 50 years disappearing shortly before his death on September 23, 1968. Although he embraced the suffering in a spirit of penance, to function as normally as possible, Padre Pio covered the wounds to keep people from staring at him.

True to his calling as a Capuchin, his life was devoted to long hours of prayer and continual austerity. But not all was suffering. Padre Pio felt a deep union with God and could spend hours celebrating daily Mass. So united was he to Christ that he at times experienced a mystical union with our Lord.ⁱⁱⁱ

Padre Pio spent many hours hearing confessions and helping sinners to experience God's divine mercy. Pope John Paul said:

"I ... had the privilege, during my young years, of benefitting from his availability for penitents. The ministry of the confessional, which is one of the distinctive traits of his apostolate, attracted great crowds... Even when that unusual confessor treated pilgrims with apparent severity, the latter, becoming conscious of the gravity of sins and sincerely repentant, almost always came back for the peaceful embrace of sacramental forgiveness."^{iv}

In the Gospel, Jesus tells us: "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." Certainly, in his illness and suffering, we see Padre Pio

embracing the cross. “Padre Pio said that suffering in the right spirit could take the soul to God.”^v

Is there some way that the common person, might follow in the footsteps of Padre Pio? At his canonization on June 16, 2002, Pope John Paul explained: “He loved to repeat, ‘I am a poor Franciscan who prays’ convinced that ‘prayer is the best weapon we have, a key that opens the heart of God.’”^{vi} So let us pray with an open heart to our loving God that he may help us to carry our crosses amidst the trials and struggles of daily life.

ⁱ padrepio.com/padre-pio/biography/

ⁱⁱ usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/liturgical-year-and-calendar/lent/penitential-practices-for-todays-catholics

ⁱⁱⁱ saintpiofoundation.org/saint-pios-biography

^{iv} vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/2002/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_20020616_padre-pio.html

^v biographyonline.net/spiritual/padre-pio.html

^{vi} Ibid ^{iv}