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# On the Footprints of Saint Padre Pio of Pietrelcina

## 1. Introduction

**L**ook now, he was so famous and managed to gather so many people around him. But why? Maybe he was a philosopher? Maybe a wise man? Maybe he had some resources to spend? The reason is that he was saying his mass in a humble way, confessing people all day long and he was also, although it is hard to explain, marked with the stigmas of Our Lord Jesus Christ. He was a man of prayer and suffering.<sup>1</sup>

These were the words that the pope Paul the Sixth addressed on 20<sup>th</sup> February 1971 to the authorities of the Capuchin order. They relate to Francesco Forgione, known world-wide as Padre Pio. This Italian Capuchin, priest and stigmatic was a person who bore the marks of Jesus Christ' suffering for 50 years and who received from God the gift of reading human consciences, bilocation and profound contemplation of Jesus Crucified. The Holy Father, John Paul the Second beatified him on 8<sup>th</sup> May 1999, and three years later, i.e. on 16<sup>th</sup> June 2002 he was canonised in front of 300 thousand pilgrims gathered at St Peter's Basilica in the Vatican.

This paper is an invitation to a pilgrimage following Saint Padre Pio of Pietrelcina. It aims at presenting the places related to the monk's life and work. The article pays special attention to

Pietrelcina and San Giovanni Rotondo, two towns in which the stigmatic spent the most of his time and which attract a few million pilgrims every year.

## **2. “There was Jesus in Pietrelcina and everything happened there”**

Pietrelcina is a little village of Benevento province, sitting on the slopes of mildly shaped hills of Sannio, 351 meters above sea level, around 12 kilometres north-east of Benevento. Its population is currently around 4 thousand people. The name of the village comes probably from “Preta Pucina”, which means a small pebble. proper



Fig. 1.  
Places connected to Padre Pio

It was in this pretty village that Francesco Forgione was born on 25<sup>th</sup> May 1887. He was the fourth out of eight<sup>2</sup> children of Grazio Maria Forgione and Maria Giuseppa De Nunzio. His house still exists currently. It is located at Vico Storto Valle Street. It was a common habit in Pietrelcina that families had their houses dispersed at various locations, that is why the Forgiones had their kitchen at number 28 and their

flat and bedrooms were at number 32. Some pieces of furniture, like a chest of drawers, a couple of chairs, an oil lamp and a double bed with the parents' photograph were preserved. There is a stone plaque on the external wall of the building, reading that 'On 25<sup>th</sup> May 1887 Francesco Forgione, known as Padre Pio of Pietrelcina, was born in this house. To commemorate his 100<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary – brothers from Pietrelcina.'

Little Forgione was christened Nicolantonio Orlando, the parish priest in the little church of Santa Maria degli Angeli on 26<sup>th</sup> May 1887. Currently the church is under the invocation of Saint Ann. Forgione was christened as Francesco, to honour Saint Francis of Assisi, for whom his mother had special respect.<sup>3</sup> His childhood was happy, and his family were poor but deep believers. When he was only five years old, Francesco had his first revelations and violent fits of Satan, which he hid until 1915. He was known to be a very well behaved boy and a devoted churchgoer (he used to visit St Ann's twice a day, in the morning and in the evening).

St Ann's church is the oldest sanctuary in Pietrelcina. It was built in 13<sup>th</sup> century. It was badly destroyed during an earthquake of June 1688, and restored only in 1700. It was in this church that the spiritual life of Francesco Forgione took shape. It was there that he experienced the revelation of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which he saw above the main altar, it was there that he served for the masses and took his First Holy Communion as well as the sacrament of confirmation, which he received on 27<sup>th</sup> September 1899 from Donato Marii Dell'Olio, the archbishop of Benevento. Often, upon the sacristan's consent, he would stay for many hours after the mass in a closed church, praying.

The second sanctuary related to Padre Pio of Pietrelcina is a parish church Santa Maria degli Angeli. This church of three aisles was built in the first half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century on the plan of a Greek cross. Padre Pio used to pray solemnly under the figure of Madonna della Libera. He worshiped this Madonna until the last days of his life, calling her 'our Madonella'. He started his service as a deacon there, performing his first baptism and from 1910-1916 he was saying masses there, if his health allowed him to stay in the monastery community.

Pilgrims coming to the hometown of Padre Pio usually visit also the Capuchin church under the invocation of the Holy Family. This sanctuary was erected upon a clear suggestion from Padre Pio. Staying in Pietrelcina during his studies, and then also as a priest, Padre Pio used to walk around the village with his parish priest Salvatore Panulla and other seminarists. In 1909, during one of these strolls, they came to the place of the current church and the monastery. One of the seminarists witnessed the event and described it: "*Brother Pio heard the choir of Angels singing and the bells ringing from not far from us and he showed us with his hand a place to the right of the road. But none of us heard anything. (...)*". The monastery complex was built from 1928 to 1948 thanks to the financial support of an American spiritual daughter of Padre Pio, Maria Pyle. The church was consecrated on 19<sup>th</sup> May 1951 by the archbishop of Benevento, Agostino Mancinelli. It is a sanctuary built in the Roman

style, with three aisles, 40 by 20 m. The main altar includes a mosaic entitled 'the Holy Family' from the Vatican School, while its sides feature wooden figures of the Franciscan Secular Order's patrons: Saint Elisabeth of Hungary and Saint Louis, the king of France.

Piana Romana is a beautiful place in Pietrelcina, located a few kilometres away from the village centre. The Forgiones used to have their arable lands there and they often came to Piana Romana for the summer. A receptacle with some domestic appliances and a bed<sup>4</sup> has kept until now. In 1958 a chapel was built on Piana Romana, which stores an elm trunk. Near this tree Pedro Pio received his stigmata<sup>5</sup> in the fall of 1910. There is also a new round temple at Piana Romana, consecrated on 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2000. Inside the church there are stations of Christ's Glory. 14 paintings hung on the wall represent events that took place straight after Christ's Resurrection (station 1 – women at the empty grave of Jesus, 2 – Apostles Peter and John looking for Jesus in the grave, 3 – Jesus Resurrected appears to Maria Magdalene, 4 – Christ with disciples on the way to Emaus, 5 – supper in Emaus, 6 – the Resurrected appears in the dining hall, 7 – Jesus brings new life to the Apostles, 8 – Jesus frees Thomas from doubts, 9 – Jesus on Tiberiada Lake, 10 – Peter appointed head of the Apostles, 11 – sending out of Apostles with the mission of preaching the Gospel, 12 – Jesus comes to heaven, 13 – Madonna and the Apostles in the dining hall, 14 – sending of the Holy Spirit).

The pilgrims walking from the village to Piana Romana stop half way at the bridge over the "Ponticello" stream. This place is related to two events from Padre Pio's life. The devils he met there said: 'Now a Saint is passing'. It was also there that he choked on smoke, trying to smoke a 'Tuscany' cigarette.

Pedro Pio spent 52 years in San Giovanni Rotondo, but he always remained strongly attached to Pietrelcina. The last time he saw his hometown was in 1918. He used to think about it often, though. When he remembered his village, he used to say: "*There was Jesus in Pietrelcina and all happened there*". After many years he was still able to describe the places, streets and people whom he remembered from his childhood. "*As for Pietrelcina – he used to say – I remember each stone there*".<sup>6</sup> During the last war, meeting his local compatriots worried about the fate of their village, he calmed them down saying "Be peaceful, Pietrelcina will be saved like the pupil of my eye". A day after that, the soldiers left the village.

Two million pilgrims come to Pietrelcina every year. They turn out in largest numbers on 25<sup>th</sup> May, when the village celebrates the anniversary of Pedro Pio's birthday. The Holy Mass is then said by one of the bishops. Just like all around Italy, also 23<sup>rd</sup> September is celebrated in Pietrelcina, as a liturgical memory of Saint Pedro Pio. Pilgrims visit Pietrelcina also during Christmas, when a live crib is built there. 300 people took part in it in 2001, which is 10% of all the village population. The scene of Christ's birth was played by a real family, a mother, a father and a new-born baby.

On 6<sup>th</sup> January 1903 Francesco Forgione left Pietrelcina and went to the noviciate of the Smaller Capuchin Brothers Order in Morcone.

### 3. The noviciate in Morcone

Morcone is an agricultural area located at the altitude of 683 metres above the sea level, in Matese massif of Benevento province, ca 30 km north of Pietrelcina. At the request of marquis di Morcone, the Capuchins came there in 1603 and started erecting a monastery, which, with some short breaks, was the seat of the noviciate.<sup>7</sup>

At the monastery gate Francesco was greeted by brother Camillo of Sant'Elia a Pianisi, brother bursar who often went from Morcone to Pietrelcina. This monk had a great influence on Francesco's calling and contributed significantly to his decision of joining the Capuchin order. Brother Camillo accepted the noviciate candidate saying: „*Francè, bravo, bravo! Sei stato fedele alla promesso e alla chiamata di san Francesco*”<sup>8</sup>, and then presented him to the guardian Father Francesco Maria of Sant'Elia a Pianisi and the master of the noviciate Father Tommaso of Monte San Angelo. This event was represented on a fresco that was painted in modern time over the gate of the monastery. Francesco took the cell number 78. The statement on its door 'You will never gain virtue without effort and pain' has kept until current times (Tomas á Kempis, *The imitation of Christ*).<sup>9</sup> In the monastery one can also see a fireplace at which brother Pio sat at winter and a refectory, in which the monks had their meals. But the most important place related to the saint's stay in the monastery is the monastery choir. It was there that brother Pio prayed for hours under the figure of Christ Crucified to become a saint monk and he cried so much that he had to wipe tears away from the floor with his handkerchief.

On 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1903, at the foot of the main altar of the little church near the monastery, Francesco took off his lay clothes, kissed them and accepted a Franciscan habit from father master. He also received a new name: from this moment in the monastery he was called brother Pio of Pietrelcina. At the end of his noviciate, the monastery community three times conferred the highest grades on him, thus confirming his qualifications for monastery life. On 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1904, at 11.45, after a series of recollections, he took his first vows.<sup>10</sup> This event was attended by Francesco's mother, his brother Michael and uncle Angeloantonio, who came from Pietrelcina.

He wrote about his decision of joining the monastery and about the year he spent in the noviciate in his autobiographic letter of 1922: “*And where could I, my Lord, serve you better than here, in the monastery, under the Poor from Assisi (...) Let Jesus with his grace help me become a worthy son of Saint Francis, may I be an example for my brothers by making diligent, make me a perfect capuchin.*”<sup>11</sup>

On 12<sup>th</sup> October 2002 Morcone saw the beginning of the celebrations commemorating 400th anniversary of the monastery and 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Brother Pio's taking his habit (January 1903). Solemn mass was celebrated by Father Principal Paolo M. Cuvino. On 13<sup>th</sup> October the pilgrims gathered at Saint Bernard's Place watched a film about Pedro Pio's life, and after a prayer they went to the church to take part in a sermon celebrated by the metropolitan of Benevento, archbishop Serafino Sprovieri.

On 25<sup>th</sup> January 1904 brother Pio, together with Anastasio of Roio, his colleague from the noviciate and Father Pio of Benevento, the provincial, went to the so called. “professorium” in Sant’Elia a Pianisi (Campobasso province), where he started his grammar school studies (rhetoric), and then secondary school studies (philosophy).<sup>12</sup>

#### **4. Grammar school in w Sant’Elia a Pianisi**

Sant’Elia a Pianisi lies in Naples Apennine, Molise region, ca. 20 km north-east of Campobasso. After the monastery in San Giovanni Rotondo, the local Capuchin monastery, erected in the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, is the place where Padre Pio stayed the longest – 4 years in total.

Father Antonino of San Giovanni Rotondo, the teacher of clerics, writes that during his stay in the monastery Sant’Elia a Pianisi Padre Pio “at prayer, and especially after the Holy Communion, he used to cry so heavily that he created a ‘small stream’ on the floor. Asked about the reasons, he always gave an evasive answer or kept silent. Finally, as his spiritual headmaster, I obliged him to tell what it was. And so he replied: «I am crying over my own sins and the sins of all the people”.<sup>13</sup>

He described himself one of the most extraordinary events that happened to him in the monastery: “One summer night, after saying matutinum (i.e. the Hour of Reading) I opened wide the window because it was very hot and I heard noises from the cell next door. I asked myself: what is brother Anastasio doing at this time? I thought he was keeping vigil at the prayer, so I started saying my rosary. Because we were competing: which of us prays more. And I would not want him to win with me.

*As the noise became more and more intense, I decided to call my brother. At the same time I felt a horrible smell of sulphur. So I decided to lean out of window to call for him: my and brother Anastasio’s windows were very close to each other, not even a book would fit, our hand could have touched. ‘Brother Anastasio, brother Anastasio!’, I tried to call him without raising my voice. Receiving no answer, I stepped back. To my terror I notice a huge dog entering through the gate, smoke coming from his mouth. I dropped to my bed and I heard (a voice) saying: “E’iss, e’iss (That’s him, that’s him)” As I was lying there, I saw an animal that jumped up to the window pane, then on to the roof and then disappeared’.<sup>14</sup>*

Another supernatural event that happened in the monastery was bilocation. It was described by the young brother Pio: “Many years ago, something unbelievable happened to me: I was in the choir together with brother Anastasio, around 11.00 p.m., on the 18<sup>th</sup> day of the last month (January 1905). Suddenly I found myself somewhere far away, in a house of a rich family. The father of the family was dying, and a small baby girl was born to the world. Virgin Mary appeared and said: «I entrust this creature to you; it is a precious rough stone, work on it, polish it and do everything you can to help it become gleaming, as one day I will want to ornament it...»

How will that be possible? I am still just a poor cleric. I do not know whether I will have the joy and the happiness of becoming a priest. How will I think about this girl (Take care of her) being so far away from her?

*And Madonna added: «Do not hesitate. A day will come when she will come to you, but you will meet her before that in Saint Peter's basilica...».*

*After that I found myself in the choir again".<sup>15</sup>*

After graduating from the grammar school in the second half of October 1905, Brother Pio, together with his colleagues, moved to a monastery in San Marco La Catola (Foggia province).<sup>16</sup>

## 5. In San Marco la Catola

San Marco la Catola is a village of Apulia region, ca. 30 km east to Campobasso, lying over the valley of Catola stream (right tributary of Fortore).

Father Pio was in the monastery of San Marco la Catola, erected in 16<sup>th</sup> century, a couple of times. His longest six months stay was after finishing grammar school studies in 1905 and then he spent one month in spring of 1918. He met there Father Benedict of San Marco in Lamis, who was his spiritual father until 1922.

Father Dameso of Sant'Elia a Pianisi, who spent one month with Father Pio in the monastery San Marco la Catola recalled one event that he remembered very well: *"One evening we were meditating in the choir. I sat close to him to his right (I can remember it really well). As I was curious, I secretly wrapped my index finger with a white handkerchief that Father Pio had at his side; I thought of the gift of tears (they said that he is sick in his eyes because of crying). I took my finger out of the handkerchief- it was all wet, as the handkerchief was all soaked with tears. In my soul I managed to know something more because of the great goodness of Father Pio".<sup>17</sup>*

At the end of April 1906, when the repairs of the monastery in Sant'Elia a Pianisi were over, Padre Pio came back to this monastery to continue his philosophical studies.

On 27<sup>th</sup> January 1907 he took his vows of perpetual profession in the monastery of Sant'Elia a Pianisi at the presence of the monastery's superior Father Raffael of San Giovanni Rotondo. At the beginning of October, he came back to San Marco la Catola together with his colleagues and passed his philosophy exam there.

## 6. In the sanctuary of Madonna of the Mountains in Campobasso

Campobasso is a town located in central Italy in Naples Apennine, at the eastern slopes of Matese mountains. It is a capital of Molise region and an administrative

centre of Campobasso province. Currently its population exceeds 50,000 people. The historical buildings of the town cover the cathedral, Saint George's and Saint Bartholomew's churches, capuchins' church of Santa Maria del Monte, which is well known in the region sanctuary of Saint Mary.

The beginnings of the sanctuary go probably back to 11<sup>th</sup> century. Originally there was a chapel of Monforte castle. It belonged to the castle barons and it was a main temple of the town and a burying place for its owners' families. On 25<sup>th</sup> May 1905 the sanctuary was entrusted to capuchin brothers from Foggia. The main baroque altar features a wooden figure of Madonna del Monte – Madonna of the Mountains, famous for its graces. The figure represents Maria seated, holding Baby Jesus in her right hand and supporting him with his left hand. This figure was crowned during special celebrations held on 5<sup>th</sup> June 1904 by Benedetto Bonazzi, the archbishop of Benevento.<sup>18</sup>

Brother Pio visited the sanctuary of Campobasso Mountain on numerous occasions, as a young profes in 1905. He used to help in the sermons held there. He returned there in October 1909 at the request of Father Provincial Benedict of San Marco in Lamis, whose poor health required clean mountain air. The sanctuary in Campobasso, located at the altitude of 800 meters over the sea level was definitely the right place. Padre Pio recalled his stays in the sanctuary a few months before his death, in April 1968. The cell that he lived has been turned into a chapel and contains also some objects used by the monk.

At the end of October 1907, he was transferred to Serracapriola, where he started his theological studies under the supervision of Father Agostino da San Marco in Lamis.

## 7. Theological studies in Serracapriola and Montefusco

Serracapriola is a town located in Apulia region, ca 50 km north-west of Foggia. The Capuchin monastery in Serracapriola was founded by princess Adronika del Balzo of Molfetta. A few times it served as a place for noviciate and studies. The monastery church, which is now a parish church under the invocation of Madonna the Gracious, houses a painting of Madonna famous for its graces by Francesco da Tolentino.

Father Agostino of San Marco in Lamis, who met brother Pio in the monastery in Serracapriola and who was his spiritual father later on, wrote: *"I met Padre Pio in 1907. He was good, obedient, diligent in his studies, of poor health, but do not yet see anything special or supernatural [in him]"*.

At the end of November 1908 Padre Pio left to Montefusco (Avellino province), to continue his theological studies.

Montefusco is a village of Kampania region, ca. 12 km south-east of Benevento. In 1581–1806 it was a capital of Avellino province. The capuchin monastery was erected in 1625. Because of the secularisation law, the monks left the monastery in

1867 and returned only in 1900. In 1837 cardinal Gioacchina Pecci, a later Pope Leon 13<sup>th</sup>, spent a month there.

Brother Pio was in the monastery for a short while, from the end of November 1908 until the first months of 1909, when due to his deteriorating health, he was transported to Pietrelcina by Father Agostino. Father Paolino of Casacalenda, who saw brother Pio in Montefusco, described him as a: *“beautiful, full-cheeked young man with pink face. No trace of sickness was visible. He wore a silk scarf around his neck and all his person brought goodness and rose good emotions”*.<sup>19</sup>

On 19<sup>th</sup> December 1908 Pio received his tonsure and holy orders of lower rank in the cathedral of Benevento from bishop Benedetto Bonazzi, a renowned professor of Greek, and two days later he obtained sub-deaconship from Paolo Schinosi, the archbishop of Marcianopoli. On 18<sup>th</sup> July 1909 he received holy orders of a deaconship in the monastery church of Morcone from Benedetto Maria Della Camera, the bishop of Termopoli.

## 8. In the monastery in Gesualdo

From November to December 1909, Padre Pio stayed in the monastery in Gesualdo as a student of moral theology (the monastery was a centre of theological studies at that time).

Gesualdo is a village laying in Samnite Apennine, ca 30 km south-east of Benevento. It was founded in the Longobard era by Gesualdo of Benevento, the founder of the Gesualdo family. The Capuchin monastery was founded by prince Don Carlo Gesualdo and belonged to Monastery Province of Naples. Like the monastery in Montefusco, the one in Gesualdo was abandoned when the law on secularisation of 1866 came into force. Only in 1905, the monastery was left to capuchins from Foggia. During the 1980 earthquake it was heavily destroyed and is now under restoration.

Unfortunately, no souvenirs were left there to bring evidence of Padre Pio's stay in the monastery. But his stay was confirmed by his colleagues from the noviciate and studies, e.g. Father Guglielmo of San Giovanni Rotondo: *“He was constantly suffering from health problems and he had to leave for long treatments and stay away for a long time. His absence brought the feeling of emptiness in our monastery and we lived with hope and expectation, which brought comfort and made us nearly sure that our dear Brother Pio was still with us. And when he was coming back later, we felt he never really left us, as we remembered him so vividly all the time. This was my impression, but it was shared by others, when we saw him again in Gesualdo in the centre of saint Theology after a few months...when he came back for another time. We were also constantly present in his mind, and then he showed us his feeling through his sweet and good disposition. For the same reasons he always hurried from Gesualdo to his family home”*.

On 21<sup>st</sup> July 1910 Padre Pio together with Father Eugene left Pietrelcina for Morcone. But he wrote in the letter to his provincial Father Benedict “*after one day in Morcone I immediately felt worse and I am so weak that I write these words lying in my bed, where I stay because of recurring sickness*”.<sup>20</sup> For this reason the master of the noviciate, Father Thomas of Monte Sant’Angelo allowed him to return home.

## 9. Holy orders in the cathedral of Benevento

On 30<sup>th</sup> July Brother Pio, accompanied by his parish priest Salvatore Panulla, went to Benevento to attend an exam for his priesthood. “*The examiners – he wrote in his letter to the provincial – were satisfied with the result*”.<sup>21</sup>

On 10<sup>th</sup> August 1910 in the canon chapel of Benevento cathedral, Brother Pio received his holy orders from archbishop Paolo Schinosi.

Benevento is a town of southern Italy in the Naples’ Apennine, the Campania region, lying at the mouth of the Sabato river joining the Calore river; it has the population of over 65,000. In ancient times, it was known as Maleventum, a fortified hamlet of Samnite people, while under the Roman Empire it played an important role as a key site on the Via Appia between Rome and Brindisi. During the World War II the city centre was completely destroyed by bomb attacks.

The cathedral in which Brother Pio received his holy orders is a reconstruction of a 13<sup>th</sup> century original. In the canon chapel there is a monument representing the moment when Father Pio receives his holy orders. The statement under the obelisk reads: ‘In this holy place on 10<sup>th</sup> August 1910 Saint Pio of Pietrelcina received his holy orders from archbishop Paolo Schinosi, an auxiliary bishop of Benevento’.

On 14<sup>th</sup> August the neo-Presbyter said his first mass in Pietrelcina. He wrote the following words on the picture commemorating his first service: “*Jesus. The breath of my life – today I am trembling – lifting you – in this mystery of love – let me be with you for the world – the Way, the Truth, Life – and for you a saint priest – a perfect substance*”.<sup>22</sup>

In August 1910 when he came to his home village, Padre Pio received ‘invisible stigmas’ on Piana Romana, which has already been mentioned. He wrote about them in the letter to Father Benedict of 8<sup>th</sup> September: “*Something happened yesterday evening, that I can neither explain nor understand. A red thing has appeared in the middle of my palm, its shape similar to cenym; I also felt strong and sharp pain. This pain was in the middle of the red thing and it was stronger in my left hand, I can even feel it now. It also hurts a little under my feet. The same thing has appeared a few times for nearly a year now, but it has not come back for some time now*”.<sup>23</sup>

On 12<sup>th</sup> October 1911 provincial Father Benedict of San Marco in Lamis brought Padre Pio for a medical examination in Naples. Doctor Antonio Carderelli recommended that the patient be placed in the monastery of Venafro, the nearest to Naples, because a longer journey could have proved too strenuous, especially as Padre Pio’s days were numbered ....

## 10. In the monastery of Venafro

The town of Venafro is located in the Molise region, 50 km east of Campobasso. It was an important town under the Roman Empire on the road from Sannio to Campania.

The local Capuchin monastery was founded in 1537 by benefactors and the municipality. Similarly to the monastery of Marco la Catola, it was closed in 1811. After five years the monks returned to the monastery, but in 1867 they had to abandon it again. Finally the monastery re-opened in 1870.

Padre Pio spent around 40 days in the monastery of Venafro, mainly lying in his bed. During his stay, the community observed first supernatural signs: divine ecstasies that could have lasted for an hour and short tempting by Satan. Father Augustin recollects them: *“In November 1911 in Venafro, Father Evangelist and myself observed supernatural phenomena. I was present at a few ecstasies and torments by satan. I wrote down all that I heard him saying during the ecstasies and the way satan tormented him (...). During his stay in Venafro he lived with Eucharist alone, both when he could say the mass himself and when he took Holy Communion, not able to celebrate the sermon”*.<sup>24</sup>

On 7<sup>th</sup> November 1976 the monastery cell of Padre Pio in Venafro was consecrated by bishop Achille Palmerini and turned into a chapel.<sup>25</sup>

As his health kept deteriorating, on 7<sup>th</sup> December 1911 he returned to Pietrelcina, where, to everybody's surprise, he celebrated a singing mass on the following day. With some short breaks, he stayed in his hometown until 17<sup>th</sup> February 1916 (in 1914 he spent a few days in Morcone and San Marco la Catola).<sup>26</sup>

## 11. Between the monastery and the army

At the beginning of November 1915 Padre Pio received a summon for a military service. On 6<sup>th</sup> November he made his presence at the military recruitment board in Benevento. After military medical checks, he was transferred for observation at the Main Military Hospital in Caserta.<sup>27</sup> He spent there over a week, and then he was recruited for a military service in the 10<sup>th</sup> Sanitary Corps in Naples.

He spent only 12 days in the army, because, as he wrote to Father Augustin, after a group of doctors examined him, he was given a one-year rehabilitation leave due to a lung infection. He returned from Naples to Pietrelcina on 19<sup>th</sup> December 1915.

During Padre Pio's stay in his hometown, his superiors pressurised him to return to the monastery life. On 17<sup>th</sup> February 1916, under the request of the provincial, Padre Pio moved to Saint Ann's monastery in Foggia. He decided to leave to Foggia in order to provide spiritual leadership for Raffaolina Cerase. He never returned to Pietrelcina again.

Foggia is a town in south-east Italy, in the northern part of Apulia region, lying in the Tavoliere plain. It is an administrative centre of Foggia province with the population of 160,000. Officially it is assumed that it was founded by the citizens of the ancient town of Arpi, which lost its power after the 3<sup>rd</sup> Punic War (3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.) in the 13<sup>th</sup> century it was the residence of the German Emperor Frederick the Second, and then it belonged to the family d'Anjou. During the 1731 earthquake and then again during bomb raids of 1943, the town was almost completely destroyed. There are two well-known Saint Mary's sanctuaries located in Foggia. The cathedral houses a wooden icon of Madonna di Sette Veli, while the sanctuary of Madonna in the Crown is devoted especially to the cult of the Black Madonna. Another interesting place in the town is a baroque church of the Crosses, located in one of the oldest town districts. The church is called the Calvary Mountain under the invocation of Saint Cross and it has seven chapels. Nearby, there is a monastery and a Capuchin church under the invocation of Saint Ann's, consecrated on 16<sup>th</sup> May 1916 by bishop Salvatore Bella.

Pedro Pio stayed in this monastery until 4th September 1916. He did not eat suppers at that time, so straight after evening prayers he went to his cell. As his brothers said, a very noisy devil came the monastery together with Padre Pio. One evening, the community gathered in the refectory heard a loud detonation from Padre Pio's room. *"I sent brother Francesco of Torremaggiore (1876–1951) to Padre Pio's cell. – wrote Father Nazareno of Arpaia, the monastery superior – I thought that something must have happened. He must have knocked a chair down and now he is calling somebody to help him put the chair up again. Brother came upstairs and asked Padre Pio whether he needed anything. But Padre Pio replied: "I did not call and I need nothing". After making sure that Padre Pio needed nothing, he started his supper. On the following evenings similar detonations were heard. And the monks in the refectory started imagining what was going on there (...)"*<sup>28</sup> After such detonations he was found sweating and his clothes had to be changed.

At the beginning of July 1916 Father Paolino of San Giovanni Rotondo came to the monastery in Foggia to say a homily before Saint Ann's celebrations. When he talked to Padre Pio, he invited him to visit the monastery of San Giovanni Rotondo. Accepting the invitation, Padre Pio came to the village for the first time on 28<sup>th</sup> July and he spent there a couple of days. *"The days when Padre Pio stayed here – wrote Father Paolino later on – brought him great comfort in his ill health. With satisfaction he enjoyed the clean air of the mountains surrounding the monastery. He was not sleepy by the heavy and hot air of Foggia. When our community went to sleep, he also rested. And he started recovering his strength. And although he was tormented by satan every night, I did not notice any sweat on his shirt, as I helped him change it. I was very happy and never regretted having invited him to come along with me"*<sup>29</sup>

He returned to the monastery in Foggia on 5<sup>th</sup> August 1916.

A week later Padre Pio asked provincial Father Benedict to allow him to stay in San Giovanni Rotondo, as the local climate was good for him. His request met with approval, and on 4<sup>th</sup> September he was ‘temporarily’ sent to San Giovanni Rotondo. This temporary stay lasted in fact 52 years.

At the beginning of December 1916 Padre Pio came to Pietrelcina. He was waiting there for a summon to the army. On 18<sup>th</sup> December he left to a military unit in Naples. But he stayed there only until 30<sup>th</sup> December, because after medical examination he received a six-month sickness leave.<sup>30</sup> He returned to San Giovanni Rotondo on 6<sup>th</sup> January 1917, stopping on his way in Pompeii, Pietrelcina and Foggia.

In May 1917 Padre Pio spent a week in Rome. He came there with his sister Graziella, who joined the Saint Brigide’s convent.<sup>31</sup>

On 30<sup>th</sup> June 1917 he was re-called to the military service. Due to an administrative error, he came to the unit in Naples only on 19<sup>th</sup> August 1917. After numerous medical checks in the First Medical Clinic of Naples he was considered fit for internal military service, although as he wrote to Father principal: “*All my body is sick; broad inflammation of bronchi, I look as a skeleton, malnourished and so on. My God! There is so much injustice*”.<sup>32</sup>

During his military service in platoon number 4 of the 10<sup>th</sup> Medical Corps he was a guardian, a messenger and even a litter man. On 7<sup>th</sup> October 1917, he was sent for medical treatment to the Main Military Hospital of the Saint Trinity in Naples, and a month after that he received a four-month leave and returned to San Giovanni Rotondo on 12<sup>th</sup> November.

In March 1918 he went to the military barracks for the last time. After medical examinations he was exempt from military service and sent home, to die a peaceful death, as doctors said.<sup>33</sup>

From San Giovanni Padre Pio went to the nearby village of San Marco in Lamis on numerous occasions.<sup>34</sup> He went on a pilgrimage to a sanctuary of Saint Michael Archangel in Monte Sant’ Angelo, a place well known on the Gargano Peninsula. But he never left San Giovanni Rotondo for good.

## 12. San Giovanni Rotondo – the town of Saint Padre Pio

San Giovanni Rotondo is a town in southern Italy, on the Gargano Peninsula in the Apulia region, ca. 30 km north of Foggia. Currently, it is the most important place of Saint Padre Pio’s cult and one of the most popular pilgrimage place in the world.

Key objects related to Padre Pio’s life in San Giovanni Rotondo include the church under the invocation of Madonna the Gracious. It was there that Padre Pio said his masses for 52 years, prayed and heard confessions. Construction works on the temple were started in 1540 and it was consecrated on 5<sup>th</sup> July 1676.<sup>35</sup> The monastery was dissolved twice; the first time by Joseph Bonaparte in 1810 and then by Eugene, the

prince of Sabaudia in 1867 when, devoid of caretakers, the church turned into ruins. The Capuchins returned to San Giovanni Rotondo in 1909.

The church houses an object of centuries'-long cult, the picture of Madonna the Gracious, famous for its graces. It comes from 14<sup>th</sup> century and represents Madonna with Baby Jesus looking for food and two angels carrying a crown over Maria's head. On 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1959, the picture received the papal crowns from cardinal Federico Tedeschini.<sup>36</sup> Over the main entrance there is a monastery choir, the favourite place of Padre Pio's prayers. It was there that he received his visible stigmas on 20<sup>th</sup> September 1918. Writing to his spiritual leader, he presented a detailed and moving description of this event: "(...) *It was on the morning of the twentieth day last month. It was in the choir. I finished saying the mass. Suddenly I felt overwhelmed by sleepiness, which was like a sweet dream. All external and internal senses, and even my soul felt very peaceful. There was absolute silence around me and in me. I was overwhelmed by great peace. I was prepared to abandon everything and to continue staying in this catastrophe. All this happened very quickly.*

And as it continued, I saw a mysterious figure in front of me, similar to the one I saw on 5<sup>th</sup> August. The difference was that the hand, feet and side of this figure were dripping with blood, which I felt at that moment. I felt I was dying and I would have probably died if Lord did not enter and strengthened my heart, which wanted, as I felt it, to escape from my chest.

*The figure disappeared and I notice that my hands, feet and side were pierced and were dripping with blood. Imagine my pain as I felt it now and as I still feel it almost every day. My heart continues to bleed, especially from Thursday to Saturday. Father, I am dying of pain and wounds and the embarrassment I feel deep in my soul because of that*".<sup>37</sup>

The place where Padre Pio used to sit in the monastery choir is now marked with information plaque. The choir itself is very simple – wooden walls, modest large benches with tables and high backs and a cross with the figure of Christ in agony.<sup>38</sup>

To the left of the church entrance there is a confessional in which Padre Pio heard confessions of women from 1935 until his last days, with the altar of Madonna Immaculate next to it. Padre Pio used to stop at this altar for a short prayer before starting a few-hour-long service of the reconciliation sacrament. On the opposite side there is an altar of Saint Francis of Assisi, at which Padre Pio was celebrating masses from 1935 to 1959.

Many objects related to Padre Pio's sacrament service were kept in the church vestry, which was initially the monastery choir (e.g. two confessionals, liturgy vessels). It was there that he was preparing his masses for a couple of dozen years, talking to his spiritual sons and heard confessions of men, according to the Italian habit.<sup>39</sup> The pilgrims who wanted to confess their sins to Padre Pio had to wait in long queues, and that is why they stayed in San Giovanni Rotondo for even 15 days and longer.<sup>40</sup>

There are two stone plaques on the front wall of the church, celebrating 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the monk's priesthood (10<sup>th</sup> August 1910 – 10<sup>th</sup> August 1960) and 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his presence in San Giovanni Rotondo (1916–1966).<sup>41</sup>

As more and more pilgrims visit San Giovanni Rotondo every year, a new basilica dedicated also to the Madonna the Gracious was erected in 1956-1959, next to the old monastery church. The basilica was designed by the architect Giuseppe Gentile.<sup>42</sup> Padre Pio fully accepted the marbles of the temple, saying that one should not spare precious materials on ornamenting the God's house.<sup>43</sup> There is a mosaic above the main altar, representing Madonna the Gracious, surrounded by angels. In 2002 the figure of Padre Pio was painted in the mosaic, at Madonna's feet.

Under the basilica floor, in a small chapel, there is a crypt housing the body of the monk. On 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1968 it was consecrated by defensor general of Rome, Father Clemente da Santa Maria in Puto. This happened one hour before Padre Pio's death, just as he predicted: „*I will die when the crypt is consecrated*“.<sup>44</sup> Padre Pio died on 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1968 at 2.30. a.m. 100,000 people attended his funeral.<sup>45</sup>

Bur this basilica also proved too small for the ever-growing number of pilgrims to the San Giovanni Rotondo. That is why the construction of a new monumental temple designed to house 10,000 people began in 1993.

Until 2000, the pilgrims were able to visit the monastery cell of Padre Pio. There are every-day objects used by the stigmatic Saint, e.g. a bed, armchair, slippers, bedside table, alarm clocks, a watch and a kneeling chair with a white scarf, which Padre Pio was using to greet the pilgrims, and a glass cupboard holding his other personal belongings.<sup>46</sup> Currently, the pilgrims can only watch the cell through a glass window installed in the place of the original wall.

Near the cell, there is an oratory in which Padre Pio was saying masses from 11<sup>th</sup> June 1931 to 15<sup>th</sup> July 1933. During that time, by force of a resolution, he was devoid of his priesthood and could only say private masses in the monastery chapel, without any participants.<sup>47</sup> In the oratory Padre Pio would also hear confessions from monks, diocese priests and friend, and in the afternoons he was often saying his rosary and contemplating the Holy Script.<sup>48</sup>

The here is a Capuchin church next to the church of Santa Maria degli Angeli. Initially, it was a one-storey building and the second floor was added in 1953. In the refectory, where Padre Pio had his meals every day, there is now a plaque with a text and his figure with a blessing gesture. All year round, the place is ornamented with fresh flowers.<sup>49</sup>

The pilgrims coming to San Giovanni Rotondo take part in a mass of the way of the Cross, celebrated on the slopes of the Castello mountain. The stations of the way of the Cross were made by famous sculptor Francesco Messina, who was converted by Padre Pio. The stigmatic commented on the idea of building the way of the Cross by saying “*Among many beautiful things that you envisage to perform, this concept*

one is one of the most beautiful ones".<sup>50</sup> Construction works were started in spring 1967. Padre Pio himself blessed the cornerstone on 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1968, a few hours before his death. Ready stations were blessed by cardinal Corrado Ursi on 25<sup>th</sup> May 1971.

At the beginning of the way of the Cross there is a figure of Padre Pio made by Messina, installed in the very place where Padre Pio stood at cornerstone blessing, at the end of the way there is a figure of Christ Resurrected. The stations are made of Sardinian granite and bronze. An interesting station is the one number five, which represents Padre Pio Simon of Cyrene, who helps Christ carry the cross. Many pilgrims who go on the way of the Cross, carry wooden crosses on their backs.<sup>51</sup>

One must not forget about a Rosary Square located at the southern side of the monastery, which was a place where pilgrims gather to say goodnight to Padre Pio before his night rest. Another important building is a hospital for the poor, called a House of Relief in Suffering. It was built at the stigmatic's initiative and started operations in 1956. 10,000 patients are treated in the hospital every year.

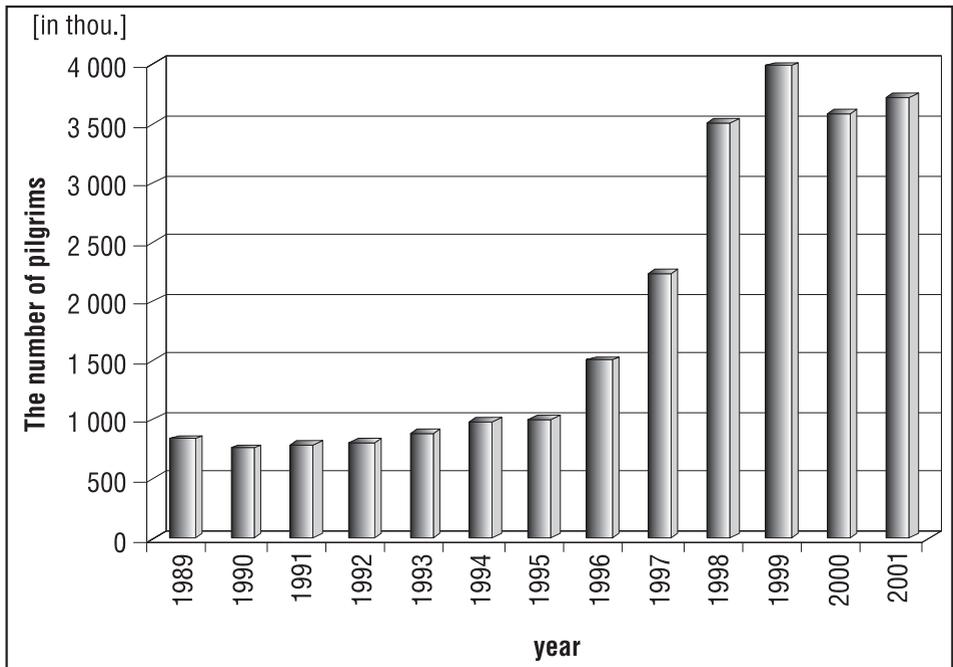


Fig. 2.

The organised pilgrimage movement to the Sanctuary of St. Padre Pio in San Giovanni Rotondo in the years 1989-2001

Source: Own analysis based on *Voce di Padre Pio* 1989-2002.

On 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Padre Pio's birthday, on 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1987, the Holy Father John Paul the Second came to San Giovanni Rotondo. At a sports stadium, the Pope celebrated a mass for 50,000 people from Apulia and other regions of Italy and the pilgrims from France, Belgium, Switzerland and the USA. Addressing the citizens of the town in his homily, John Paul the Second said: *"For a long time now, your town, San Giovanni Rotondo has been going through, one may say, the day 'that our Lord made for us'. I am thinking about the development that happened here thanks to the presence and work of Padre Pio of Pietrelcina, renowned all around the world. Also the activities of the capuchins, who carry out the work of this God's Servant, attract many pilgrims to your town. Dear brothers and sisters of San Giovanni Rotondo, may you always be worthy of the testimony that Padre Pio was giving"*.<sup>52</sup> After the mass the Holy Father blessed six cornerstones for the new outlets of the hospital of Relief in Suffering, and then went to the sanctuary of Madonna the Gracious to meet the Franciscan monks. A special moment in the Pope's visit to the sanctuary was his prayer over Padre Pio's grave. John Paul the Second knelt for a long time, holding his right hand on the granite tombstone.

Padre Pio's sanctuary in San Giovanni Rotondo is now one of the main pilgrimage centres in the world. According to the Papal Council of Migrants and Travellers, it is the second biggest world sanctuary, after Guadalupe in Mexico, in terms of the annual number of pilgrims. Every year it is visited by 7.5 million people.<sup>53</sup>

Starting from 1968, i.e. Padre Pio's death, more and more pilgrims come to the sanctuary. From 1989 to 1998 the number rose over four times (1989 – 835,000 1998 – 3,500,000) (Fig. 2). The biggest number of pilgrims was recorded in 1999, it was definitely related to Padre Pio's beatification on 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1999. Surprising enough, less pilgrims came in 2000, as compared to 1999 (-10 %). In 2001 the number of pilgrims recorded in the books came up again. The pilgrimage season lasts from May to October. English-speaking groups come mostly from the USA, Ireland, England, Philippines, Malta, Canada, Australia and Singapore (Fig. 3).

The main celebrations of indulgence in the sanctuary are organised on 23<sup>rd</sup> September, as liturgical recollections of Saint Padre Pio. The first celebrations gathered 600,000 people from Italy and abroad. They prayed to the saint for the world peace and for the employees of mass media and for artists.

## Conclusions

Padre Pio is the first priest stigmatic in the history of the Church. Through his devotion, and modesty he has spoken to large armies of believers all around the world. He encouraged people to pray, which is now reflected in numerous prayer groups that include 500,000 members. As at 25<sup>th</sup> May 2000 there were 2,159 Italian Padre Pio's Prayer Groups that were officially recognised by the bishops and entered into the International Centre of Prayer Groups in San Giovanni Rotondo. World-wide,

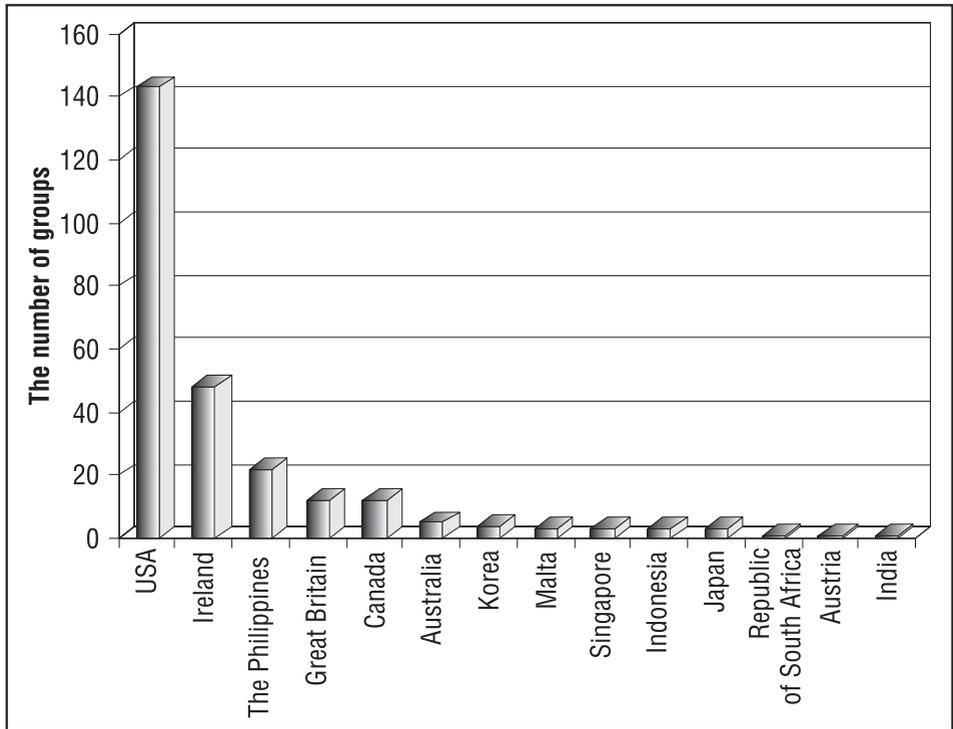


Fig. 3.

English speaking groups registered in the Sanctuary of St. Padre Pio in San Giovanni Rotondo in the year 2000.

Source: Own analysis based on *Voce di Padre Pio*.

there are currently 378 groups in 33 countries (this number only refers to the groups that are registered at the above-mentioned centre).<sup>54</sup> In many countries parishes, churches and sanctuaries devoted to this Saint Capuchin emerge. In Poland the saint's cult is practised in Jarosław, Cracow, Terliczka, Przeprośna Górka near Częstochowa, Warsaw and in other places. One must not forget about the 'Polish' House of Relief in Suffering in Radawa near Jarosław, where patients are treated for hypertension, heart diseases, neurosis, thyroid gland disorders and other diseases.

A special cult of Saint Padre Pio is observed in Italy. Apart from the above-mentioned prayer groups, there are also numerous paintings, figures, books, calendars, prayer books and other devotional articles related to Padre Pio.

We can see that cult very clearly when looking at thousands of pilgrims that go "A Padre Pio" ("to Padre Pio"), i.e. to San Giovanni Rotondo, Pietrelcina, Morcone and other places of the famous stigmatic every day. After the canonisation of Padre

Pio there will probably be even more pilgrims coming to visit these places, because, as the Holy Father said “Our times need to re—discover his (Padre Pio’s) value to open people’s hearts to hope”.<sup>55</sup>

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## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> *Canonizzazione del Beato Pio da Pietrelcina. Piazza San Pietro - 16 giugno 2002*, 2002, Tipografia Vaticana, (Roma) - Vaticano, pp. 45-46.

<sup>2</sup> Three children of Mr and Ms Forgione died in childhood, that is why usually five children’s names are quoted, of those who lived to be adults.

<sup>3</sup> R. D. Tomaselli (edited by Sroka A.), 2000, *Ojciec Pio, Stygmatyk*, Jarosław, Drukarnia USP “Usługopol”, p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> E. Cińcio, 2002, *Dyskretne piękno Piana Romana*, “Głos Ojca Pio” No 2 (14), p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> G. Amorth, 1998, *Ojciec Pio. Wiara, cierpienie, miłość*, Wydawnictwo Księża Sercanów, p. 18.

<sup>6</sup> A. Ripabottoni, 2002, *Święty Ojciec Pio ...*, p. 28.

<sup>7</sup> Currently the monastery houses noviciate of Foggis monastery province.

<sup>8</sup> „Francis, bravo, bravo! Your have proven worthy of the promise and call of Saint Francis”.

<sup>9</sup> W. Ryszka, 1988, *Winnica Padre Pio*, Wydawnictwo Wrocławskiej Księgarni Archidiecezjalnej, Wrocław, pp. 31-32.

<sup>10</sup> G. Preziuso, 2001, *Ojciec Pio w San Giovanni Rotondo*, Wydawnictwo Księża Marianów, Warszawa, pp. 16-17.

<sup>11</sup> A. Ripabottoni, 2002, *Święty Ojciec Pio ...*, p. 49.

<sup>12</sup> A. Ripabottoni, 2002, *Święty Ojciec Pio ...*, p. 49.

<sup>13</sup> A. Ripabottoni, 2002, *Święty Ojciec Pio ...*, p. 53.

<sup>14</sup> A. Ripabottoni, 2002, *Święty Ojciec Pio ...*, pp. 57-58.

<sup>15</sup> A. Ripabottoni, 2002, *Święty Ojciec Pio ...*, pp. 58-59.

<sup>16</sup> The reason of moving was repairs of the monastery in Sant’Elia a Pianisi.

<sup>17</sup> A. Ripabottoni, 2002, *Święty Ojciec Pio ...*, p. 53.

<sup>18</sup> G. Farnedi, 1996, *Guida ai Santuari d’Italia*, Edizioni Piemme Spa, Casale Monferrato, p. 298.

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- <sup>19</sup> A. Ripabottoni, 2002, *Święty Ojciec Pio ...*, p. 61.
- <sup>20</sup> *Listy Ojca Pio*, 1995, Pobladura M., Ripabottoni A. (edit.), vol. 1., Archidiecezjalne Wydawnictwo Łódzkie, Łódź, p. 163.
- <sup>21</sup> *Listy Ojca Pio*, op. cit., p. 166.
- <sup>22</sup> A. Ripabottoni, 2002, *Święty Ojciec Pio ...*, p. 69.
- <sup>23</sup> *Listy Ojca Pio*, op. cit., p. 202.
- <sup>24</sup> *Listy Ojca Pio*, op. cit., p. 13.
- <sup>25</sup> A. Ripabottoni, 2002, *Święty Ojciec Pio ...*, p. 79.
- <sup>26</sup> *Listy Ojca Pio*, op. cit., p. 146.
- <sup>27</sup> *Listy Ojca Pio*, 1996, Pobladura M., Ripabottoni A. (edit.), vol. 2., Archidiecezjalne Wydawnictwo Łódzkie, Łódź, p. 302.
- <sup>28</sup> A. Ripabottoni, 2002, *Święty Ojciec Pio ...*, p. 90.
- <sup>29</sup> A. Ripabottoni, 2002, *Święty Ojciec Pio ...*, p. 90.
- <sup>30</sup> *Listy Ojca Pio*, 1996, Pobladura M., Ripabottoni A. (edit.), vol. 3., Archidiecezjalne Wydawnictwo Łódzkie, Łódź, p. 6.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibidem, p. 138.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibidem, p. 174.
- <sup>33</sup> B. Strzechmiński, 2000, *Ojciec Pio idzie do wojska*, "Głos Ojca Pio", No 3, p. 16.
- <sup>34</sup> He came there for the first time with his provincial father in October 1916 and stayed three days at Carducci Street. See *Listy Ojca Pio*, 1996, Pobladura M., Ripabottoni A. (edit.), vol. 3., Archidiecezjalne Wydawnictwo Łódzkie, Łódź, p. 85.
- <sup>35</sup> J. Marecki, 2000, *Świątynia klasztorna*, "Głos Ojca Pio", No 2, p. 31.
- <sup>36</sup> J. Marecki, 2001, *Cudowny wizerunek*, "Głos Ojca Pio", No 9, p. 31.
- <sup>37</sup> A. Ripabottoni, 2002, *Święty Ojciec Pio ...*, p. 116.
- <sup>38</sup> J. Marecki, 2002, *Chór zakonny*, "Głos Ojca Pio", No 5 (11), p. 27.
- <sup>39</sup> J. Marecki, 2000, *Zakrystia*, "Głos Ojca Pio", No 4, p. 31.
- <sup>40</sup> G. Flumeri, 1987, *W hołdzie Ojcu Pio*, Edizioni «Padre Pio da Pietrelcina» Monasterio «S. Maria della Grazie» San Giovanni Rotondo, p. 20
- <sup>41</sup> J. Marecki, 2000, *Świątynia klasztorna*, "Głos Ojca Pio", No 2, p. 31.
- <sup>42</sup> J. Marecki, 2001, *Bazylika Matki Bożej Łaskawej*, "Głos Ojca Pio", No 1 (7), p. 27.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibidem.
- <sup>44</sup> B. Strzechmiński, 2000, *Gdzie jesteś o śmierci?*, "Głos Ojca Pio", No 3, p. 16.
- <sup>45</sup> A. Negrisolo, N. Castello, S. M. Manelli, 2001, *Tajemnica Ojca Pio*, Kraków, Wydawnictwo WAM, Kraków, p. 156.

- 46 J. Marecki, 2000, *Cela zakonna*, "Głos Ojca Pio", No 4, p. 27.
- 47 A. Ripabottoni, 2002, *Święty Ojciec Pio ...*, p. 194.
- 48 J. Marecki, 2001, *Oratorium*, „Głos Ojca Pio”, No 4 (10), p. 27.
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- 55 Homily of John Paul the Second said on of 16th June 2002 in Rome during the canonisation of Padre Pio, "Głos Ojca Pio", No 16, p. 14.

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