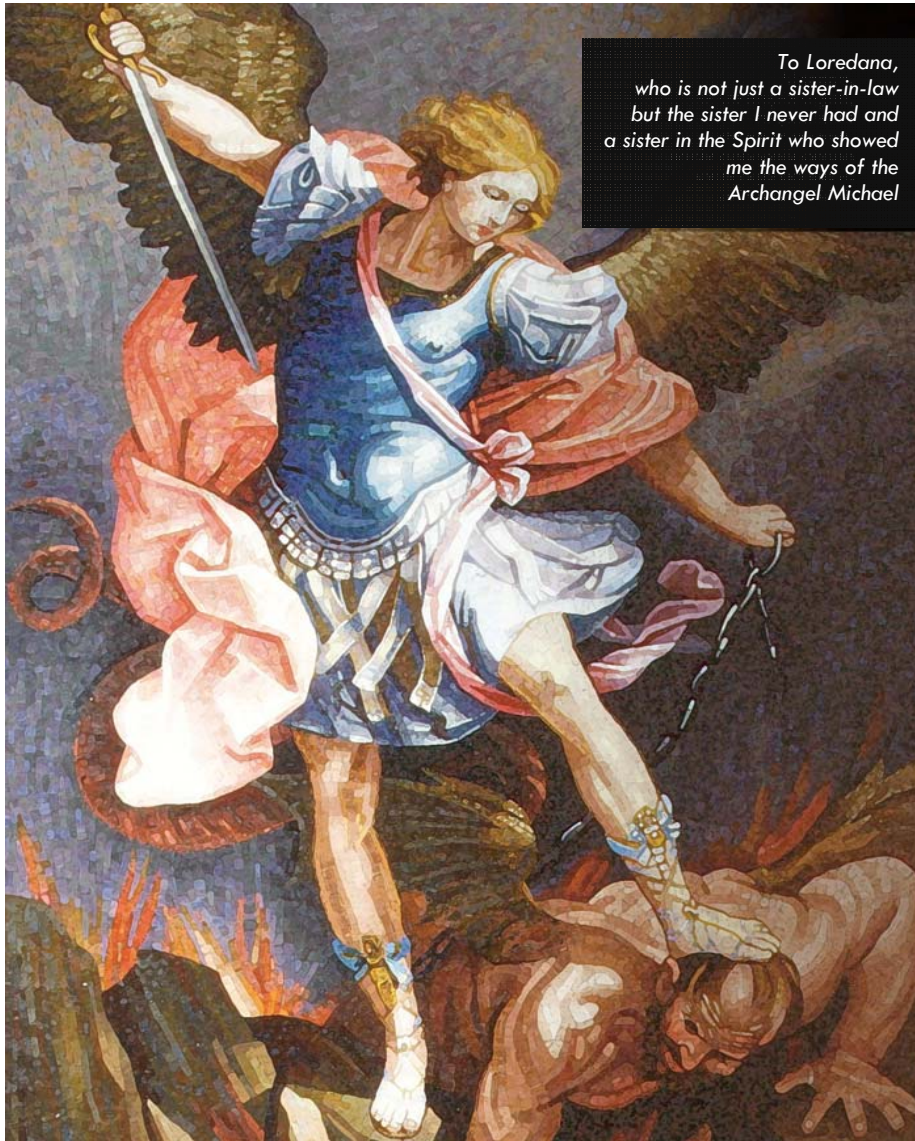


VINCENZO COMODO

| SPECIAL DEVOTION
Padre Pio's
TO ST. MICHAEL THE ARCHANGEL

TRAVELING PHOTOGRAPHY EXHIBITION



Presentation

We know that “the existence of the spiritual, non-corporeal beings that Sacred Scripture usually calls ‘angels’ is a truth of faith. The witness of Scripture is as clear as the unanimity of Tradition”¹. We were also taught that “as purely spiritual creatures angels have intelligence and will: they are personal and immortal creatures, surpassing in perfection all visible creatures, as the splendor of their glory bears witness”². Finally, we learned that “from infancy to death human life is surrounded by their watchful care and intercession. ‘Beside each believer stands an angel as protector and shepherd leading him to life’”³.

These statements, which are clearly part of our faith inheritance, now seem to have gone out of fashion. They seem like something straight out of a popular devotions book from the beginning of the past century. And yet, right in the midst of a skepticism that began to erode the confidence of both believers and nonbelievers in the existence of these invisible beings, the Lord gave a Capuchin friar—who had ended up in an isolated town in Gargano—the important task, among many others, of reaffirming both the reality and the roles of angels in our lives.

These “purely spiritual creatures” carried out many tasks throughout Padre Pio’s earthly journey. For example, they gave him advice, translated foreign languages, and provided consolation after attacks by demons (other angels who rebelled against God and are the enemies of human happiness). This holy friar’s many experiences are documented by his own pen in extensive letter collections.

Padre Pio did not limit himself to simply telling of the angelic interventions in his daily life, which was made extraordinary by mystical experiences and unique charisms; rather, he constantly invited his spiritual children to commit themselves to the care of their guardian angel or to invoke the aid of St. Michael the Archangel, allowing them to experience firsthand the beneficial effects of these heavenly creatures’ intervention. Fr. Eusebio Notte, who was the personal assistant of the Capuchin marked by the stigmata for five years, can speak from experience. He sent his guardian angel to ask Padre Pio for prayers while he was on an airplane in grave danger. The plane successfully landed and fr. Eusebio returned to San Giovanni Rotondo, where St. Pio froze him in his tracks with a phrase that left little room for interpretation: “It’s a good thing your guardian angel made it in time, otherwise you wouldn’t be here right now”⁴.

The contemporary age, as Pope Benedict XVI has pointed out many times, is home to a culture born of hedonism and relativism in which purely spiritual heavenly creatures, like everything else connected to life beyond this world, are clouded by a hidden veil of censorship. It is therefore the right time to rediscover the silent yet active presence of these beings of whom Padre Pio spoke as one would speak of dear,

living, and present friends, confidants, or participants and members in a club or community in which all those involved know and help one another⁵.

This project, under the direction of Vincenzo Comodo, therefore deserves attention and grateful recognition. Using the modern language of images, it communicates once again a message that is not merely ancient, but everlasting and ever current. It is a message that reminds us of the existence of something beyond the tangible, something toward which we are all oriented and that we cannot reach through our own efforts alone. This reality is not just the future but also the present, and it is even visible to the eyes of faith.

Comodo’s art therefore opens itself to the broad conceptual horizons of catechesis without any pretense of navigating the narrow paths of historical specificity. The message takes the forefront, relegating precision of detail to the background.

The result is a theological compendium understandable to people of all cultural levels. At the same time, it serves as a practical guide for overcoming the snares of our present age (sown by the rebel angels), which hinder our journey toward God, with the aid of someone more powerful and more knowledgeable than any human being.

Convinced of the great fruits of goodness that will come of it, it is my hope that this exhibition will travel great distances and meet with great interest through the aid and intercession of all the angels, particularly St. Michael the Archangel, and the man who constantly experienced their presence and action in our time: St. Pio of Pietrelcina.

Foggia, may, 25, 2010

fr. Francesco D. Colacelli
Provincial Minister OFM Cap.

¹ CCC, 328.

² *Ibidem*, 330.

³ *Ibidem*, 336, citing St. Basil, Adv. Eunomium III, I: PG 29, 656B.

⁴ E. Notte, *Padre Pio e padre Eusebio*, Grafiche Grilli, Foggia 2007, p. 478.

⁵ A. Parente, *Mandami il tuo angelo custode*, Edizioni Padre Pio da Pietrelcina, San Giovanni Rotondo (Fg), 2001, p. 38.

Preface

For fifteen centuries, thousands upon thousands of pilgrims have been journeying to the Celeste Basilica [*Celestial Basilica*] to visit St. Michael the Archangel. They come from all over the world and commit themselves to his protection. They devote themselves to him and pray to him; they come as penitents and resolve once more to live the Gospel in practice; they express acknowledgment and bring their thanks for graces obtained through his powerful intercession.

These pilgrims have included many sovereigns and multiple popes, but also many children of Mother Church who are visibly honored as saints and many others who have died with the sweet aroma of sanctity. In our own time, we could think of John Paul II – who visited no less than three times – and, prior to him, the friar marked by the stigmata: Padre Pio of Pietrelcina.

We could say without exaggeration that Padre Pio felt a duty to travel to the Holy Grotto of St. Michael the Archangel: he nurtured an immense devotion to the Prince of Angels – victor over Satan and terror to his demonic followers – as early as the tender years of his childhood, which grew continually throughout the time of his heroic priestly mission, and according to his own statements he also enjoyed such noble company on a daily basis.

Those who have experienced a pilgrimage to the Santuario di Monte Sant'Angelo [*Shrine of Mount St. Angel*] know how Michael the Archangel acts and how he manifests himself to us mortal beings. It is not through images and statues, which are nonetheless beautiful and captivating, but by touching the most profound sinews of our spirit. It is right here that St. Michael breaches the human heart to let in the light of God, who brings pilgrims to new life through the forgiveness and grace of Christ the Savior. And Padre Pio knew this well.

Through his traveling photography exhibition, Vincenzo Comodo communicates this point well and becomes a faithful interpreter of Padre Pio's ceaseless exhortation to all his devotees. He accomplishes it by using images prepared through the use of modern technology and enriched by helpful explanations to emphasize the exhortation itself and fully understand its relevance. The images allow us to "see" how important St. Michael was in Padre Pio's holy life and to "foresee" how he important he could be in our own.

With hearty appreciation for the savory fruits it will bring, I now follow the example of Padre Pio by inviting everyone to visit St. Michael the Archangel and commit themselves to his protection.

Monte Sant'Angelo, may, 8, 2010

Padre Ladislao Suchy
Rector of the Shrine of
St. Michael the Archangel

Introduction

It is well known that Padre Pio had an extraordinary relationship with angels and particularly with his guardian angel. He advised his devotees to turn to this delightful and heavenly spirit not just during the dark moments of our earthly journey, but always. In so doing, they would be choosing their guardian angel as a faithful and beloved companion for life. He even invited them to rely upon their guardian angel in order to deliver messages to him. When people asked how to contact him, Padre Pio would often respond, "Send me your guardian angel".

His ardent devotion to the Prince of Angels, on the other hand, is less known. It was a devotion that, throughout his life, increasingly took the shape of an entirely unique relationship. While certain aspects were apparent, many others remained shrouded by the secrets of a mutual understanding that left little room for doubt.

This exhibition therefore aims to specifically address the intimate relationship between Padre Pio and St. Michael the Archangel, highlighting the latter's role in accompanying the Capuchin from Pietrelcina along his formidable journey to holiness and in aiding him during his violent struggles with the Devil. This accompaniment and assistance began at his birth and ended with his blessed passing from this life.

St. Michael's protection of the newly born Francesco Forgione from the moment of his first wail is not surprising. The Almighty's most valorous warrior, who drove Satan and his rebel angels out of heaven, knew full well God's plan for that child who would become the first priest with the stigmata. He likewise knew that Satan would do everything possible to prevent its fulfillment. Hence the archangel Michael stood at his guard from his first day of life.

As a testament to this, a holy soul told fr. Mariano Paladino – one of Padre Pio's nurses – of a vision of the Holy Grotto at Monte Sant'Angelo. In the vision, young Francesco was in a cradle protected by the wings of the archangel Michael. Thinking it might have been a hallucination, Fr. Mariano recounted the vision to the Capuchin saint, who sharply replied, "I would have been doomed if it hadn't been for St. Michael: you would be looking at Padre Pio beneath the feet of Lucifer by now"⁶.

This is just one of the signs of St. Michael's presence in Padre Pio's mission. There are many others. Among those included in this artistic exhibition, we could think of the images of Michael that he wanted in the hospital, known as the Casa Solievo della Sofferenza [*Home for the Relief of Suffering*], and in the Chiesa di Santa Maria delle Grazie [*Church of St. Mary of Graces*]; the resonant exhortations he sent to his spiritual children and devotees so that they would visit the "Casa di San Michele" [*Home of St. Michael*] to greet him and ask for his powerful protection; or the prayer to St. Michael composed by Leo XIII that he recited at the end of every Mass. Entering into the mystical dimension on the basis of his own affirmations, we could also think of St. Michael's role in the maturation of Padre Pio's decision to consecrate his life to God by joining the Franciscan family; the pilgrimage he made to the Celestial Basilica at Monte Sant'Angelo where he became even more aware of the future that awaited him; his frequent visits to the Holy Grotto for unknown reasons; and the constant companionship St. Michael offered him. Considering the rewards he received in life

⁶ M. Stanzione, *San Pio da Pietrelcina e l'Arcangelo San Michele*, Gribaudo, Milano 2007, p. 63. 8

for his exceptional and heroic practice of Christian virtue, we could also think of his beautiful aromas – which St. Michael is responsible for dispensing – and the signs of the Passion of Christ, which some say were impressed upon him by St. Michael himself.

Among the other known signs that were not included in this exhibition (because they can be traced back to tasks carried out by his spiritual children), despite having his own approval and even at his “request”, we could cite the apostolate work of Lina Fiorellini and Msgr. Giuseppe Del Ton.

The first of the two received an image from Padre Pio on which he had written, “May St. Michael protect you from the infernal enemy”. She received approval to reprint a book by fr. Nicola Ricci, titled *La Quaresima di San Michele* [St. Michael's Lent], which was originally published in 1869. It contains forty meditations in honor of the archangel Michael. Lina Fiorellini had the brilliant idea of printing a new edition with a modern linguistic style. With this intention, she sent a letter to Padre Pio. In it, she wrote, “Padre, I would like to popularize the devotion to St. Michael the Archangel in order to bring peace to the world and conquer the pride of human passions in this society devastated by wars, conflicts, massacres, and horrors”⁷. Her spiritual father fully and joyfully approved. The title of the book was changed to *Le grandezze di San Michele* [The Grandeurs of St. Michael] and the number of meditations was reduced to thirty-one so there would be one for each day of the month. It was published on the thirtieth anniversary of the day St. Pio received the stigmata and met with a noteworthy welcome. In this manner, with Padre Pio's total support, Lina Fiorellini contributed significantly to the budding in many people, and the full blooming in many others, of a devotion to St. Michael.

The second, Msgr. Del Ton, was given an “order” by the saint from Pietrelcina. He recounts, “On the night of November 11, 1956, I was in Pompeii and had a dream I'll never forget. Padre Pio appeared to me and blessed me saying, ‘You must do something for the good of the Church and for the gladness of the people. Do something to renew the devotion to St. Michael. Work together with other intelligent and ascetic men’. That dream”, the prelate continues, “was prophetic. In the years that followed, various circumstances led me to organize a cultural association, together with some other people, whose aim was to instill new life in the devotion to St. Michael the Archangel. We called it the *Milizia di San Michele Arcangelo* [*Militia of St. Michael the Archangel*]”⁸.

Yet aside from this priceless “companionship” with which he was blessed, why was Padre Pio so strongly attached to St. Michael? There are many possible answers: by heroically living the Gospel of Jesus and proclaiming it through the many charisms granted him by the Almighty, alongside the Supreme Commander of the Army of God, he fought Satan and his demonic hordes; St. Michael was his leader, guide, and companion in proclaiming the truth of the Risen Lord and unveiling the deception strewn by the Devil throughout the world for the perdition of souls; he wanted everyone to know the Prince of Angels as the great rival of the “Ancient Serpent” who, after having seduced Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, continues to slither throughout history and beguile human beings in an effort to destroy the Church of Christ and thwart the Almighty's plans for redeemed mankind; he also wanted the archangel Michael to be known for his infinite love of God and as a supreme exam-

ple of absolute faith in the Almighty, particularly by his devotees and spiritual children; he desired that everyone ask for the vigilant and powerful protection of St. Michael against the deception and allurements of Satan, who is always lying in wait; and because he wanted everyone to turn to the archangel Michael as a powerful intercessor before God.

It is hardly coincidental that nobles, knights, princes, and sovereigns have journeyed to the Holy Grotto over the course of time. Cardinals of the holy Catholic Church, some of whom became successors of Peter to the papal throne like the unforgettable John Paul II, as well as saints like Padre Pio himself, have likewise made the journey, as have multitudes of consecrated religious and simple pilgrims imploring graces and blessings.

It is fitting to recall that we men and women, though we are not angels, also become soldiers of God at the moment we receive the sacrament of Confirmation. As such, we are therefore called to reject temptations and to fight wickedness, falsehood, and capital vices, all of which are caused by the Devil. Taking our place beneath the banner of St. Michael, it is therefore our duty to fight against the infernal enemy. But how? Simply by practicing the teachings of the Savior: in a word, by loving. The saints are clear models for imitation in this sense, especially those to whom we are particularly devoted.


As already mentioned, Padre Pio also nurtured a particular and special devotion to St. Michael. He also chose him as his guide for imitating Christ precisely because of the infinite zeal and dazzling ardor that the archangel Michael shows for the Lord. The love he had for St. Michael therefore cannot go unnoticed by any of his devotees; in fact, it should be given significant weight. To put it frankly, accepting Padre Pio's invitation to commit ourselves to the protection of the Prefect of the House of the King, this love should be shared. In simply logical terms, without too many fancy words, we can deduce that, in order to be true devotees or spiritual children of Padre Pio, we need to be devoted to St. Michael as he was.

Roma, may, 8, 2010

Vincenzo Comodo

⁷ G. Leone, *Prefazione*, in N. Ricci, *Le grandezze di San Michele Arcangelo*, Edizioni Casa Sollevio della Sofferenza, San Giovanni Rotondo (FG) 1991, III-XVI.

⁸ M. Stanzione, *San Pio da Pietrelcina e l'Arcangelo San Michele*, op. cit., pp. 59-60.



Premise

My experience with photography is only that of an amateur. I must admit, however, that I enjoy using it as a means of evangelization and for promoting Catholic culture. I usually combine it with graphics software – creating photomontages – and the written word to bring out messages that would otherwise remain hidden. That is why each image is accompanied by short captions.

I believe this to be a very incisive and “instantaneous” communication method for conveying both powerful content and important details that, while right in front of everyone’s eyes, often go unnoticed. It is therefore a way of eliciting an interest for further investigating the topics addressed.

The sequence of images presented here follows the chronological unfurling of Padre Pio’s life, from his birth into the world to his birth into heaven, passing through some of the most significant places where he lived and listening to the voices of those who have testified to his special devotion to St. Michael.



Purpose



The title speaks clearly: the most obvious goal of this photography exhibition is to highlight Padre Pio’s special devotion to St. Michael; however, there are other fundamental yet less evident aims as well. Let’s take a closer look at them. One is to invite all visitors and Padre Pio devotees to discover Michael the Archangel by improving their knowledge of him, committing themselves to his protection by acting on the awareness of his power to put Satan and his allies to flight, and becoming devoted to him by admiring his magnificent and inestimable love of God; in other words, by following the example of Padre Pio himself.

As alluded to earlier, Padre Pio constantly encouraged everyone to visit St. Michael and place themselves under his protective wings. Let us not be deaf to this appeal by our revered Capuchin friar. In addition to the tremendous personal and spiritual benefits we will receive by accepting it, we will also please him. Another aim of this exhibition thus becomes easy to guess: bringing joy to Padre Pio through the encouragement of devotion to St. Michael.

Acknowledgments

I feel profoundly obliged to thank all those who contributed to this exhibition in different ways and to different degrees. Recognizing the importance of each person's contribution, I am grateful to the following people, in no particular order: my sister Loredana, to whom I dedicate this exhibition; my brother Nando, for his photography and computer graphics advice; my brother Gianni, for several invaluable suggestions; Sr. Gloria Pasquariello, Mother General of the Suore Apostoliche del Sacro Cuore [*Apostolic Sisters of the Sacred Heart*]; Paola Russo and Stefano Campanella, hostess and the director of Teleradio Padre Pio, respectively; Giulo Siena, press office director for the Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza [*Home for the Relief of Suffering*]; his zealous over-ninety-year-old father, Giovanni, spiritual child and biographer of Padre Pio; the Mediaset Group, represented by Dr. Stefano Di Toma; fr. Antonio Belpiede, official spokesperson for the Religious Province of Sant'Angelo and Padre Pio OFM Cap.; fr. Aldo Broccato, past minister of the same province; fr. Francesco Colacelli, current minister; fr. Francesco Di Leo, rector of the Santuario di Santa Maria delle Grazie [*Shrine of St. Mary of Graces*] in San Giovanni Rotondo; fr. Ladislao Suchy, rector of the Celeste Basilica di San Michele Arcangelo [*Celestial Basilica of St. Michael the Archangel*]; the Congregazione di San Michele Arcangelo [*Congregation of St. Michael the Archangel*]; Paolo Iorio, director of the Museo del Tesoro di San Gennaro [*St. Gennaro Treasure Museum*] in Naples; the Voce di Padre Pio [*Voice of Padre Pio*] editorial staff; Celeste La Riccia, fr. Francesco Armenti; fr. Thomas Wronsky; fr. Josu Alday; fr. José Rovira; fr. Arturo Pinacho; fr. Santiago González Silva; John Alexander Di Camillo; Sergio Petta; Raffaele Piano; the communes of Campobasso, Pietrelcina and Sant'Elia a Pianisi; the Associazione Superamento Handicap [*Overcoming Handicaps Association*] in San Paolo di Civitate and the Associazione Culturale "Camelia" [*Camelia Cultural Association*]. I offer them my most sincere thanks with the awareness that this exhibition would not have been possible without their contributions.

Photogallery



From the time he was a child

Desde su infancia, Padr Padre Pio already nurtured a very special love for the archangel Michael from the time of his childhood. When he was six years old and would take his family's sheep to pasture, he often shaped sacred images in clay: the Christ child, Our Lady, St. Joseph, and especially St. Michael. He and a friend of about the same age, Mercurio Scocca, would make little statues for the crèche. Before the start of the Christmas novena, they would line them all up in a long procession leading to a grotto in the largest area of the Piana Romana farm⁹. Obviously there were plenty of angels, and a special place was reserved for their prince, Michael, the guardian of the little divine Child¹⁰.

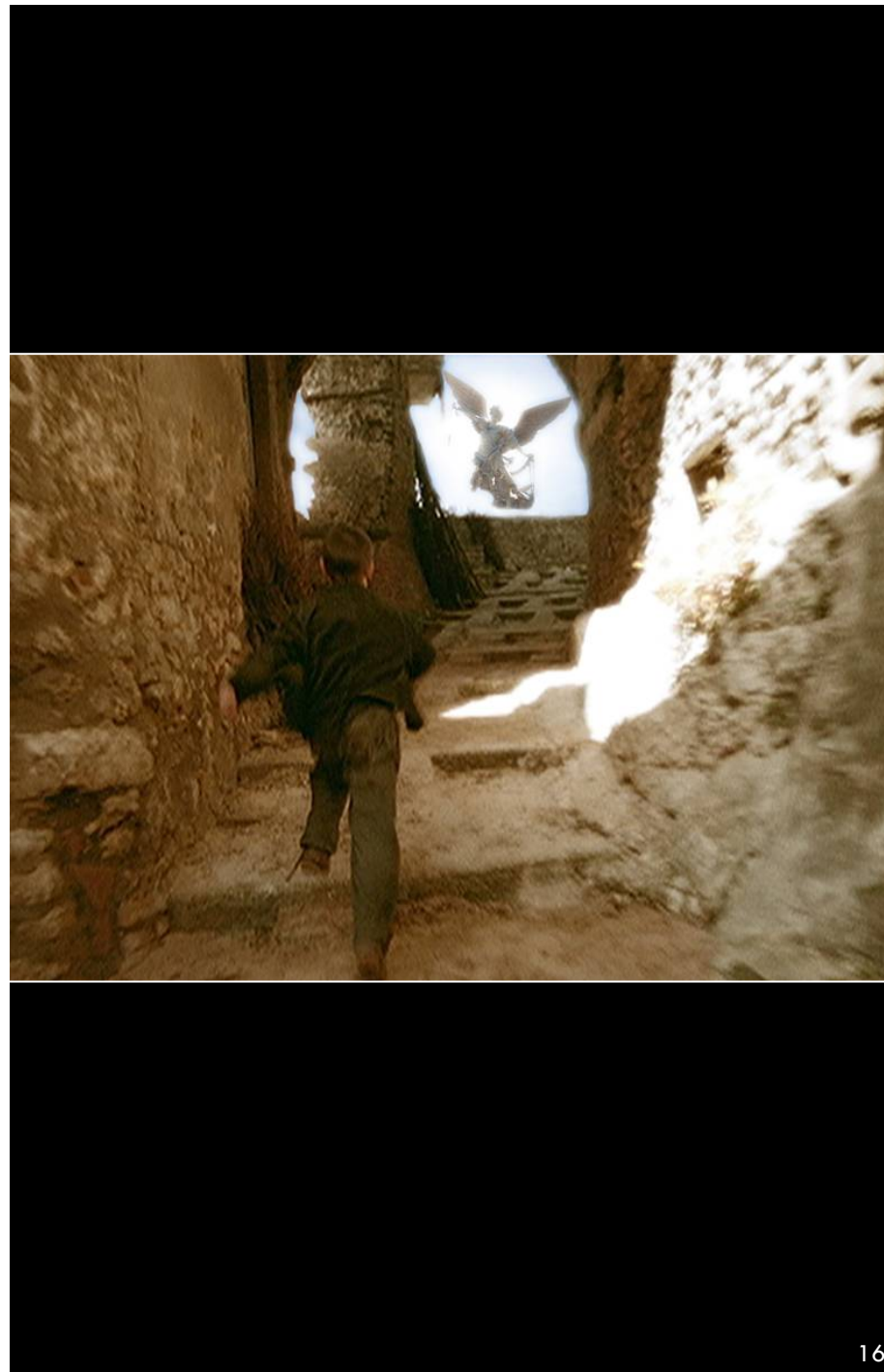
This love for the archangel Michael is understandable in light of the support he gave to little Francesco during attacks from demons, which had already begun to manifest themselves to him "in utterly obscene forms, sometimes human and most often beastly"¹¹. As the first victor over Satan, St. Michael was given the task of guarding over the "santarello" [little saint] and aiding him in these first encounters with demons.

Michael the Archangel clearly had to be one of the various heavenly presences appearing to him after these first difficult challenges, always ready to console and accompany him along the journey toward holiness that God had planned for him.

⁹ G. Prezioso, *Padre Pio. Un itinerario per lo spirito*, Apulia, Martina Franca (TA) 1986, p. 15.

¹⁰ G. Cionchi, *Novena a San Michele Arcangelo* [Novena to St. Michael the Archangel], Shalom, Camerata Picena (AN) 1999, pp. 10-11.

¹¹ S. Campanella, *La missione di Padre Pio. Biografia dalla nascita all'esumazione*, Edinor-ba, Conversano (BA) 2008, p. 8]. The statement comes from the *Diario* [Diary] of Fr. Agostino da San Marco in Lamis, Padre Pio's spiritual director.



Young Padre Pio in Pietrelcina

Ya a los cinco años, Franc At age five, Francesco had already heard God's "calling". Thanks to countless moments dotting his journey toward religious life, his conviction of consecrating his life to the Lord grew stronger as he grew older. According to the testimony of Lucia Ladanza, one of those moments occurred while listening to a homily regarding St. Michael, on his feast day, delivered by fr. Giuseppe Orlando in the Chiesa di Sant'Anna [Church of St. Anne] in Pietrelcina¹². Before beginning his novitiate, the young man often gathered himself in prayer before the statue of St. Michael. He undoubtedly asked for help in becoming a "bearded friar" like fr. Camillo.

He had a vision, however, at fifteen years of age, just before entering the monastery in Morcone. When he was about to say "good-bye to the world", as he wrote in his autobiography, he had a vision: an exceptionally handsome man led him to a spacious area in the countryside. There were multitudes of people divided into two groups: "in one place, he saw people with beautiful faces donning white clothing as brilliant as snow; in the other place, where the second group gathered, he saw horrid-looking people wearing black clothing like dark shadows"¹³. In the area dividing the two groups, there suddenly came forward "a man so immensely tall that his forehead touched the clouds; so horrifying was his countenance that he seemed Ethiopian"¹⁴. Then the handsome man said to him, "It behooves you to fight this man. [...] I will always be at your side. [...] I will help you and will not let him defeat you". Francesco began to fight the man with the horrifying countenance—identifiable with Satan—and, in the end, overcame him and forced him to flee¹⁵.

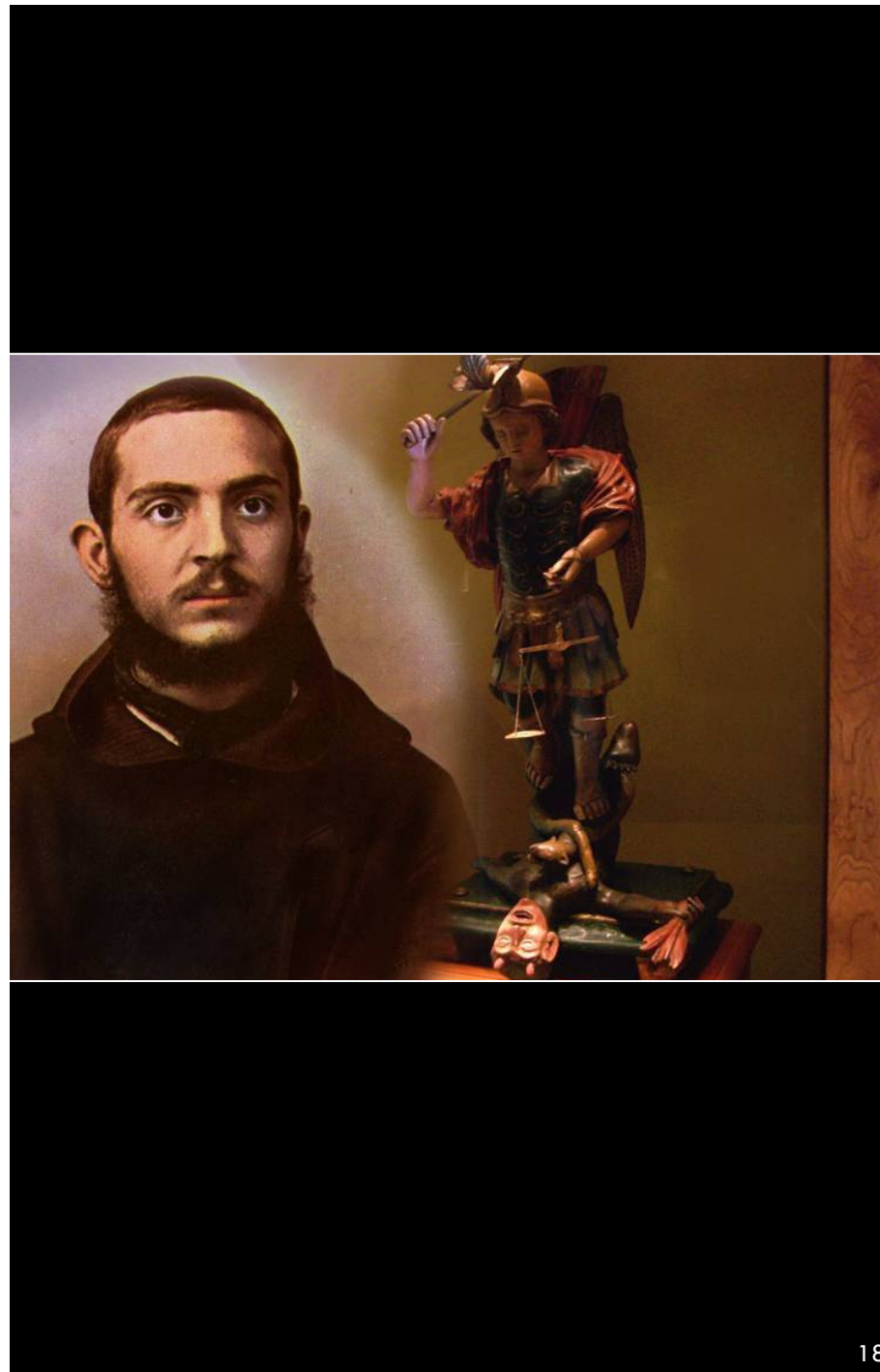
Since St. Michael is the Commander of the Army of God and the primary adversary and conqueror of Satan, who is the commander of the hordes of rebel angels, it is not far-fetched to imagine that the "exceptionally handsome man" was in fact him: the archangel Michael.

¹² Lino da Prata – Alessandro da Ripabottoni, *Beata te Pietrelcina*, San Giovanni Rotondo (FG) 1976, p. 186

¹³ Pio da Pietrelcina, *Epistolario*, I, Edizioni Padre Pio da Pietrelcina, San Giovanni Rotondo (FG) 2002⁴, pp. 1280-1282.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 1281.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.



The “official” visit to St. Michael

It was July 1, 1917 when Padre Pio traveled to the Celestial Basilica at Monte Sant'Angelo. He ardently desired to make a pilgrimage to the “home” of St. Michael as St. Francis had done. He did not go alone, but rather with fourteen young friars from the school where he was the spiritual director. They left at three o'clock in the morning, and during the trip they were stopped by the police out of the suspicion that some of them were army deserters. Padre Pio continued for several kilometers on foot, but at a certain point he began to grow weak, sweating dangerously. It did not bode well for the rest of the journey, so the superior, fr. Paolino, decided to have him sit in their handcart ambulance to avoid further risks¹⁶.

When they arrived, Padre Pio remained still before the “Porta del Paradiso” [Gateway to Heaven], which was inscribed above the entrance, at great length. Historian Gherardo Leone recorded the following account of events: “He gathered himself in prayer for forty-five minutes before celebrating Mass, then began the religious rite at the Altar of the Archangel. He was deeply and visibly moved while offering the Eucharistic sacrifice in this place consecrated to St. Michael the Archangel. After the celebration, he remained for another forty-five minutes. He was pale and trembling from the cold; he had been in that humid and frigid grotto for three hours. [...] In that moment of immense spiritual intensity, in the half-light of the grotto of St. Michael the Archangel, Padre Pio became fully aware of his religious mission and even had a premonition of what the Lord had in store for him”¹⁷.

This was the only official visit Padre Pio made to St. Michael in his Holy Grotto together with other pilgrims. Of course, he made infinitely many others on his own through paths known only to mystics. It was no coincidence that he often told his devotees, “I always visit the Holy Grotto at Monte Sant'Angelo”¹⁸.

¹⁶ M. Morra, *Il mistero del dolore in Padre Pio e gli angeli del conforto* [The Mystery of Pain in Padre Pio and the Comforting Angels], Edizioni Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza-Edizioni Padre Pio da Pietrelcina, San Giovanni Rotondo (FG) 2006, p. 310.

¹⁷ M. Stanzione, *San Pio da Pietrelcina e l'Arcangelo San Michele*, op. cit., pp. 52-53 [translation mine].

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 55.



“La Costa”

Over the course of the centuries, St. Michael's grotto has been a constant pilgrimage destination. Some would go every year from places where the inhabitants were particularly devoted to the archangel Michael, forming so-called “companies”. During the journey, they would sing psalms, pray, and strike up old songs and litanies. Many traveled barefoot to implore graces or express gratitude. They would be welcomed by lengthy and festive bell-ringing, which would be repeated upon their departure. Nonetheless, the only company still truly *in auge* is the one from San Marco in Lamis.

In order to reach the shrine, however, this large group of devotees takes a special path known as “la Costa” [*the Coast*]. According to tradition, in fact, this was precisely the road St. Michael took—without flying—to reach the grotto that his own hands would consecrate. Padre Pio, together with his young fellow friars, also followed that same road with endless joy in his heart and the immense honor of treading the same earth trodden by the feet of Michael the Archangel.

The image depicts the final leg of the coast trekked by the San Marco in Lamis Company. It is also interesting to note that St. Pio gave them the same consideration he had for those from San Giovanni Rotondo because his first spiritual directors, fr. Benedetto and fr. Agostino, were born in San Marco, a town protected by St. Matthew and right nearby San Giovanni Rotondo.

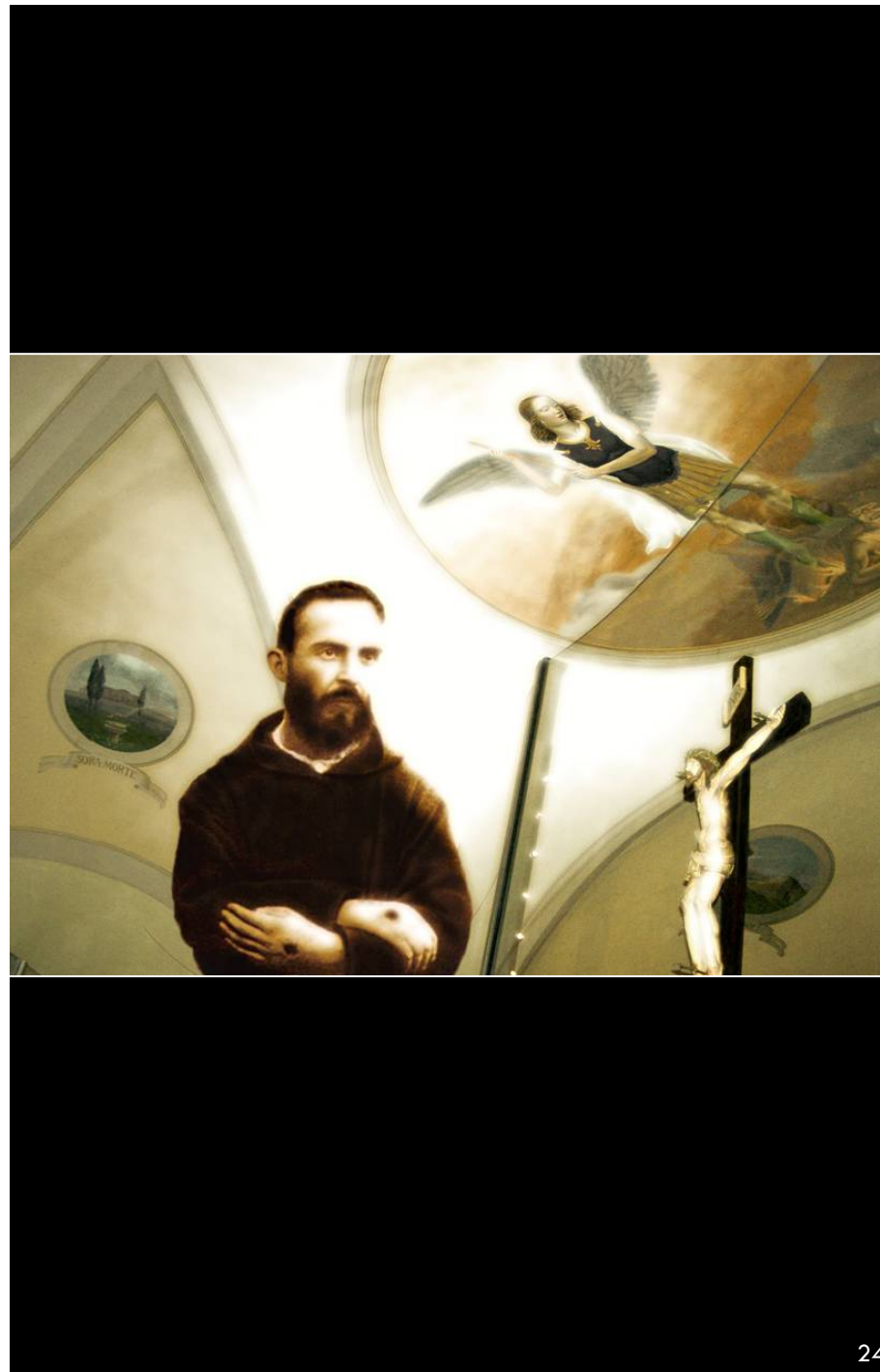


Stigmatization

St. Michael's role in the life and works of Padre Pio became apparent a year after that powerful pilgrimage to the Celestial Basilica. In 1918, in fact, he experienced extraordinary trials in the form of transverberation, stigmatization, and transfixion. In order to better understand these events, it is helpful to examine several moments of Padre Pio's life alongside parallel events in the life of St. Francis.

Every year before May 8th and September 29th, the dates of St. Michael's first apparitions at Monte Sant'Angelo, the "poverello" [poor man] from Assisi would observe a "lenten period" in honor of St. Michael: forty days of penance, fasting, and prayer. It was during one of these lenten periods that he received the stigmata from a seraphim who, according to numerous Franciscan annotators, was St. Michael himself¹⁹.

Padre Pio often observed such lenten periods, and he too received the stigmata during one of them. The date was September 20th: the first day of the Novena to St. Michael the Archangel. But from whom did he receive them? Who was this "mysterious person" he spoke of? Padre Pio never revealed this secret. Some experts on mysticism and spirituality historians affirm that it was St. Michael as well²⁰. And it is interesting to note that in the old monastery church where the event occurred, St. Michael the Archangel is depicted on the vault above the crucifix in front of which he received the signs of the Passion of Christ.

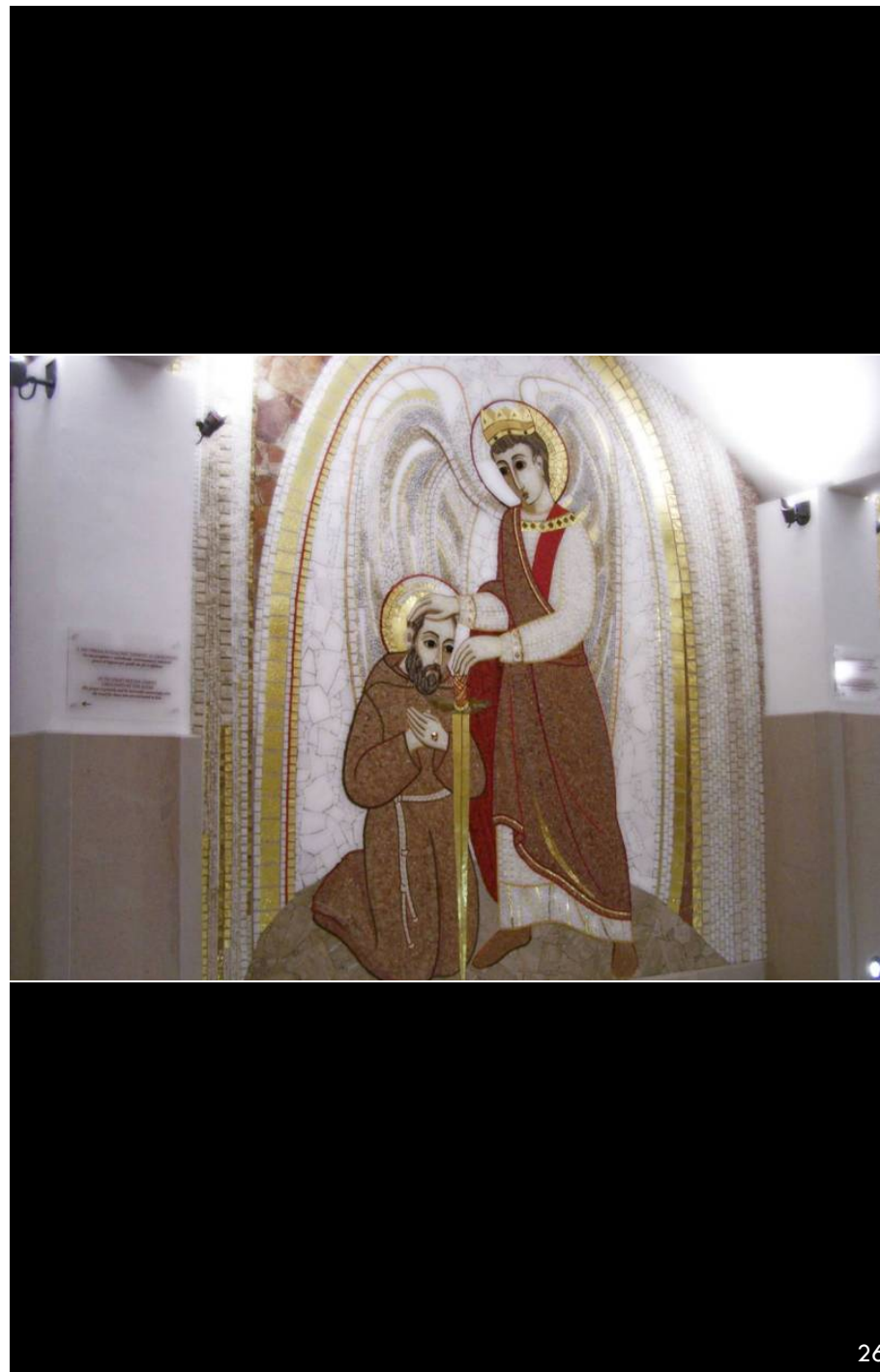


¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 49.
²⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 53-54.

Under St. Michael's protection

The walls along the ramp descending into the new crypt of Padre Pio are lined with splendid mosaics produced with tasteful artistry by fr. Marco Rupnik. They depict the lives of St. Francis and Padre Pio in parallel. The aim is clearly to draw the respective journeys to holiness of these two exceptional witnesses to the Risen Christ alongside one another, demonstrating how similar they are. Some of the points of similarity between these two champions of faith in God include a love for Christ reciprocated by the signs of his Passion, spiritual combat, preaching of repentance, ardent zeal, brilliantly living out the consecrated religious vocation, and enthusiastic evangelization. In addition to all these things, however, their fervent love for St. Michael should also be recalled.

In commenting on the mosaic that depicts him, which appears in this photo, the artist wrote, "Partly because of his connection to Gargano, Padre Pio had a great devotion from an early age to the archangel Michael and turned to him for support in spiritual combat, aware of the spiritual origins of the evil in the world. St. Michael blesses him here by the imposition of hands, the gesture communicating a transfer of power from one to another. And St. Michael fulfills Padre Pio's prayer by conferring him the spiritual sword and the bestowing him with the power to fight against evil, a task that Padre Pio carried out his entire life even at the cost of great suffering"²¹.



25 ²¹ M. I. Rupnik, *Il cammino dell'uomo nuovo. Con san Francesco e san Pio da Pietrelcina*, Li-
pa-Edizioni Padre Pio da Pietrelcina, Roma-San Giovanni Rotondo (FG) 2009, p. 27.

“He is always here”

St. Michael's visit to Padre Pio on July 1, 1917, documented in a letter Padre Pio sent to Assunta Di Tomaso the following day, was mentioned earlier. It was also mentioned that, according to his own statements, he always traveled to the Holy Grotto—it is easy to imagine—by the paths reserved to mystics alone. Michael the Archangel never fell short of returning the favor: he continually visited the holy Capuchin. Padre Pio also admitted this, and there are various supporting testimonies. We could take the case of Daniela Dolce, for example, one of his devotees, who went to Padre Pio after visiting the Celestial Basilica to tell him she had asked St. Michael to stay close to her spiritual father and sustain him in carrying out his priestly ministry and caring for souls. Upon hearing this, he immediately replied, “He is always here”. He gave the same response to Anita Zanotti, from Rimini, while talking about his special relationship with the Secretary of God.



To the prayer groups

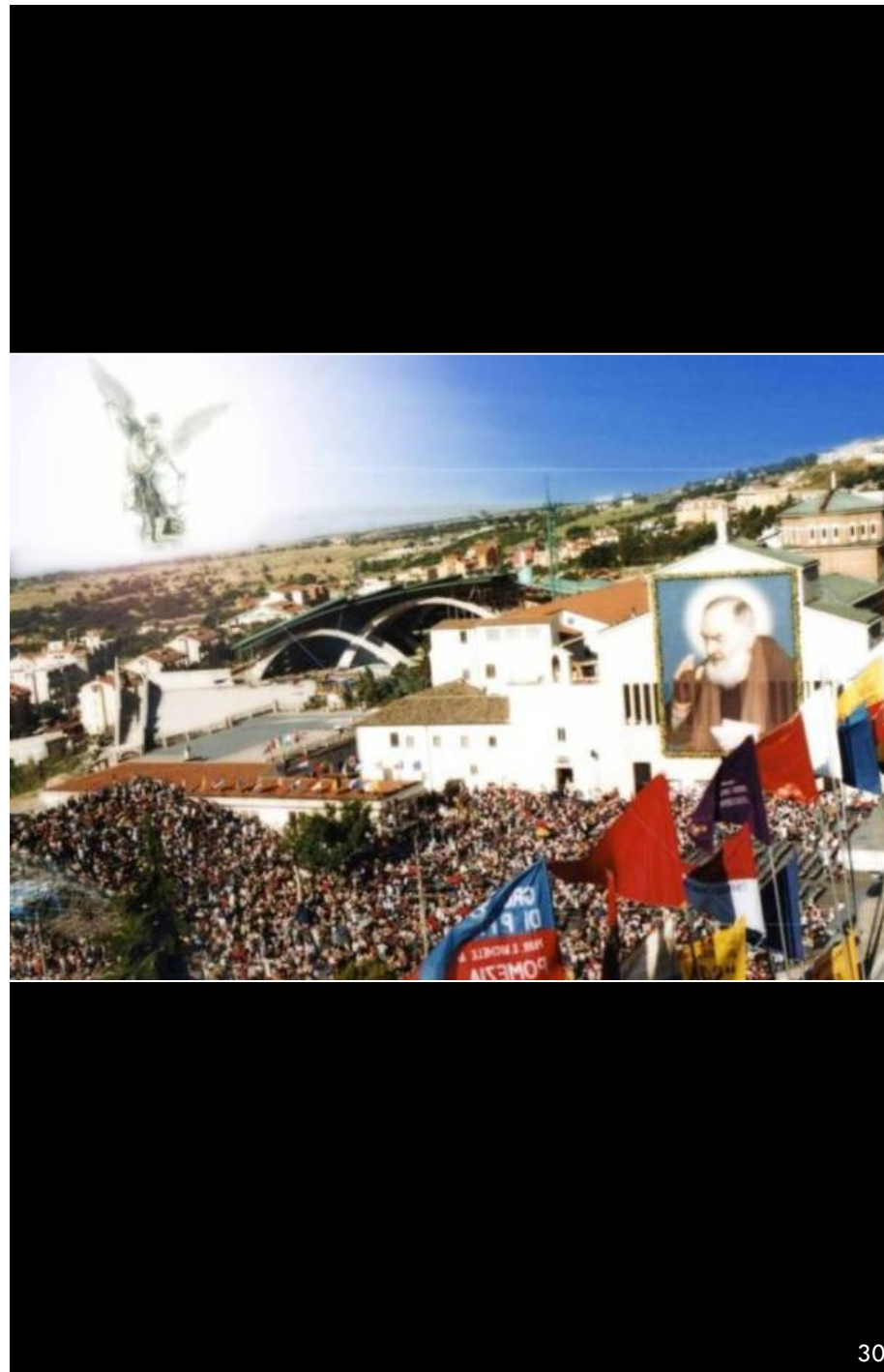
One of Padre Pio's most important "works" was the establishment of prayer groups. He dedicated thoughtful care and truly significant attention to them. Over the years, they have spread throughout the world and multiplied beyond measure.

In this manner, Padre Pio welcomed Pius XII's desire to form large groups of young men and women who gather in prayer at least once a month, receive the bread of life, and lead others to follow their example²². And all of this so that the true light of Christ may also reach those who do not know it or want to ignore it²³.

Since Padre Pio was so distinctly aware of St. Michael's greatness and power, he also wanted his spiritual children to know and love the Prefect of the House of God. He often conveyed this devotion to them, in fact, encouraging them to turn to St. Michael to resolve family conflicts and reject diabolical temptations. It is easy to imagine how his desire that prayer group members love St. Michael was equally strong. This desire is still very much alive.

²² Pius XII, *Summi pontificatus*, October 20, 1939.

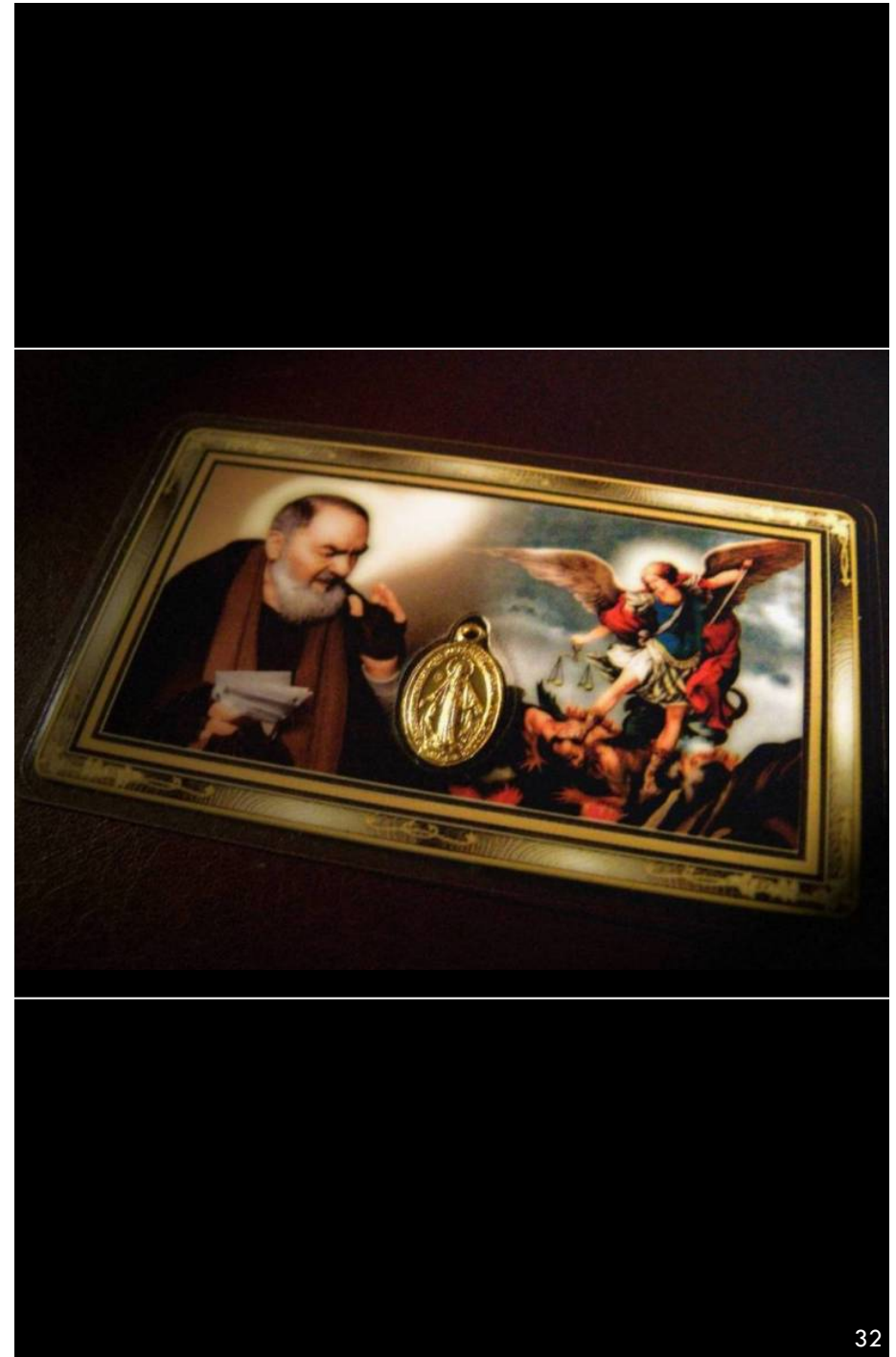
²³ *Ibidem*.



“May St. Michael protect and defend you from the infernal enemy”

Padre Pio placed himself and his spiritual children under the vigilant protection of St. Michael but did not stop there. In fact, he constantly urged his devotees to personally ask for the archangel's protection in rejecting Satan's allurements and removing any obstacle that might prevent them from living out Christ's teachings. He strongly wished that the Prefect of the Palace of God be known not only for his precious virtues and exceptional merits but also as the Supreme Leader of the Heavenly Host who, after driving Lucifer and his angels of darkness out of heaven, has fought—and will continue to fight until the end of time—against the forces of the Evil One.

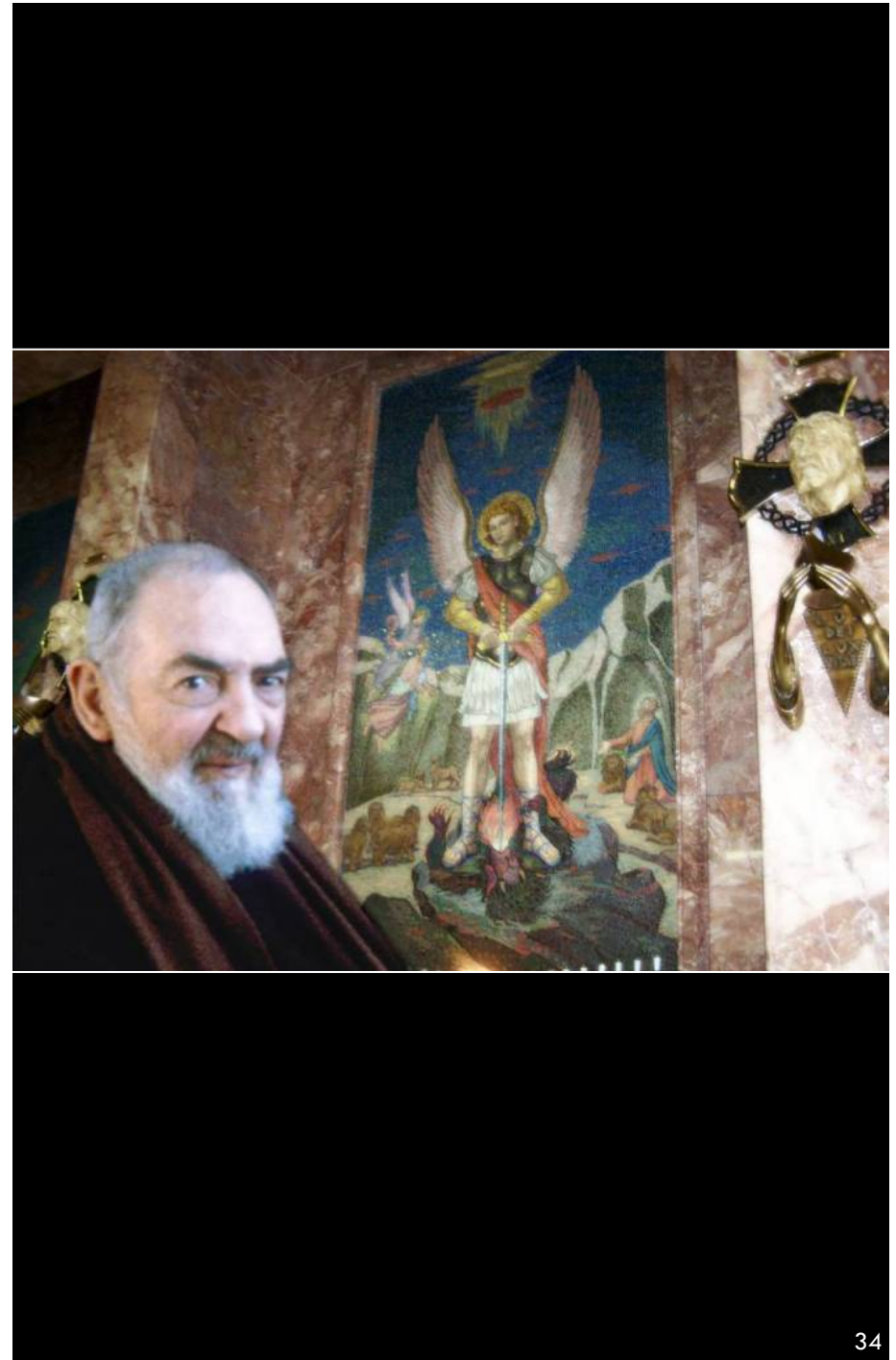
Whether we like it or not, each of us winds up fighting the Devil and his allies on a daily basis. But how do we fight them? And by what means? Padre Pio answers these questions with the example of his own life: living out the Gospel every day, devoutly falling into rank “under the banner of St. Michael” in accordance with Pius XII's exhortation, and using the “weapon” of praying the Holy Rosary to our heavenly Mother, Mary.



The altar of St. Michael the Archangel

Padre Pio strongly desired that a block of stone from the Holy Grotto at Monte Sant'Angelo be used in the construction of the Chiesa di Santa Maria delle Grazie [Church of St. Mary of Graces]. He also wanted an altar built in honor of St. Michael, to be designed in a unique manner according to his specific instructions. In fact, he instructed that the archangel's sword be transfixed through Satan's mouth, from which—fueled by drunkenness with pride and delusions of omnipotence—erupted the words of blasphemy, defiance, and rebellion against God. Furthermore, he instructed that the setting for this depiction be the lions' den into which the prophet Daniel was thrown (see Dn 14:1-42) and then saved by the angel of the Lord, who shut their mouths and did not allow them to cause him any harm. This episode, which occurred during the reign of Cyrus in Babylon, was a repetition of a similar event that had already occurred during the reign of his predecessor, Darius (see Dn 6:1-29).

There is another highly significant detail worth noting in the mosaic. Unlike most pictorial representations of St. Michael, in this one he crushes Lucifer while standing on the ground. This means that he, the Secretary of God, does not just fulfill his protective and salvific mission from above, hovering in flight, but also while touching the earth, in the midst of human beings. He not only flies but walks; he moves not only on wings but on foot; he is with the people.

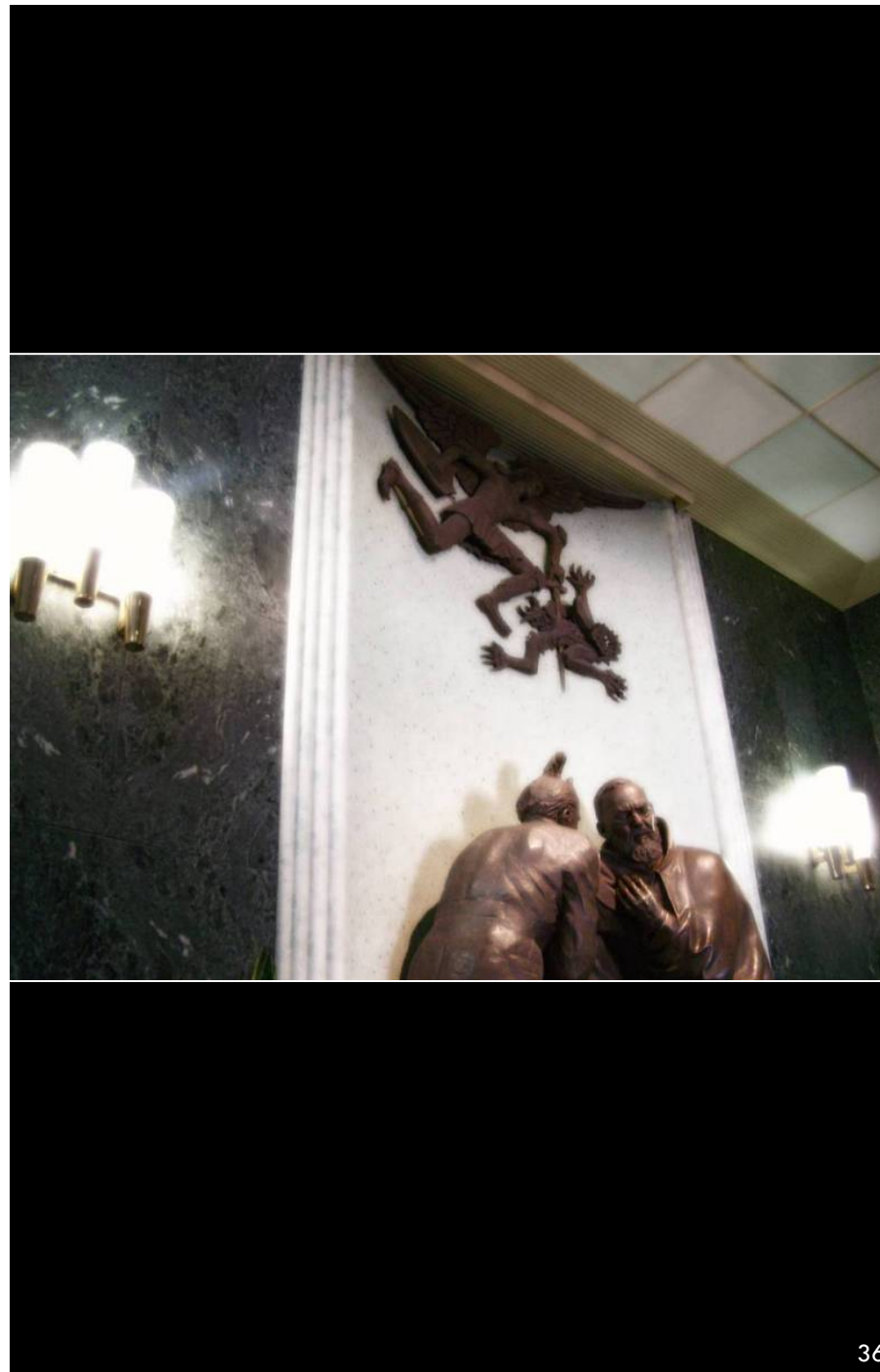


At the Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza

This image is found at the first landing of the main entrance to the Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza [*Home for the Relief of Suffering*]. Padre Pio's spiritual children, well aware of his great love for St. Michael, wanted this image of the archangel piercing the infernal dragon to be placed above the monument depicting Padre Pio in the act of blessing a spiritual child. The marble plaque beneath the monument reads, "To Padre Pio of Pietrelcina in his Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza, with grateful love from his spiritual children".

This Capuchin saint never ceased fervently exhorting his spiritual children to commit themselves to the protection of the Prince of the Heavenly Host and find in him one of the most privileged interlocutors in prayer. Hence, those who commissioned this work showed their understanding of their spiritual father's intimate connection with St. Michael.

This connection surely became stronger in the planning process and in surmounting the many obstacles encountered during the construction of the hospital. Pius XII described it as the "result of one of the highest intuitions, of an idea matured at length through contact with the most terrible and varied aspects of the physical and moral suffering of humankind"²⁴. And he did it together with his beloved St. Michael.



²⁴ Pius XII, "Discorso ai partecipanti al Congresso Internazionale di Cardiocirurgia a Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza" [*Address to the participants in the International Cardiac Surgery Congress at the Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza*], May 8, 1956.

St. Michael visits the sick

In a further indication of the intensity of his devotion to St. Michael, Padre Pio wanted an image of him placed on the tower of the Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza behind the statue of St. Francis of Assisi on the hospital roof, easily visible from the churchyard of the Church of St. Mary of Graces. A mosaic created by the Swiss artist Aurelio Gonzato depicting the Prince of the Angelic Hierarchies crushing Satan, the Ancient Serpent, was placed there. Underneath, the phrase “Michael visitat aegrotos” [*Michael visits the sick*] stands out.

It is clear how Padre Pio entrusted Michael the Archangel, Secretary of God and Member of the Heavenly Court, with the care of recovering patients in his “cathedral of charity”. He asked not only for their healing in body but also in spirit. In fact, Padre Pio sought to treat the body in order to reach the soul, turning his hospital into a temple of prayer and science. It is hardly by chance that the heart of the entire hospital complex is the chapel, situated precisely at the center of the building in order to constitute “the spiritual center radiating its strength out to the other departments”²⁵. It is quite simple to imagine that he also entrusted the doctors and health-care personnel to St. Michael, urging them to see Christ in each sick person, just as St. Michael always did, supporting him or her through the suffering and imploring God Almighty to send his graces.



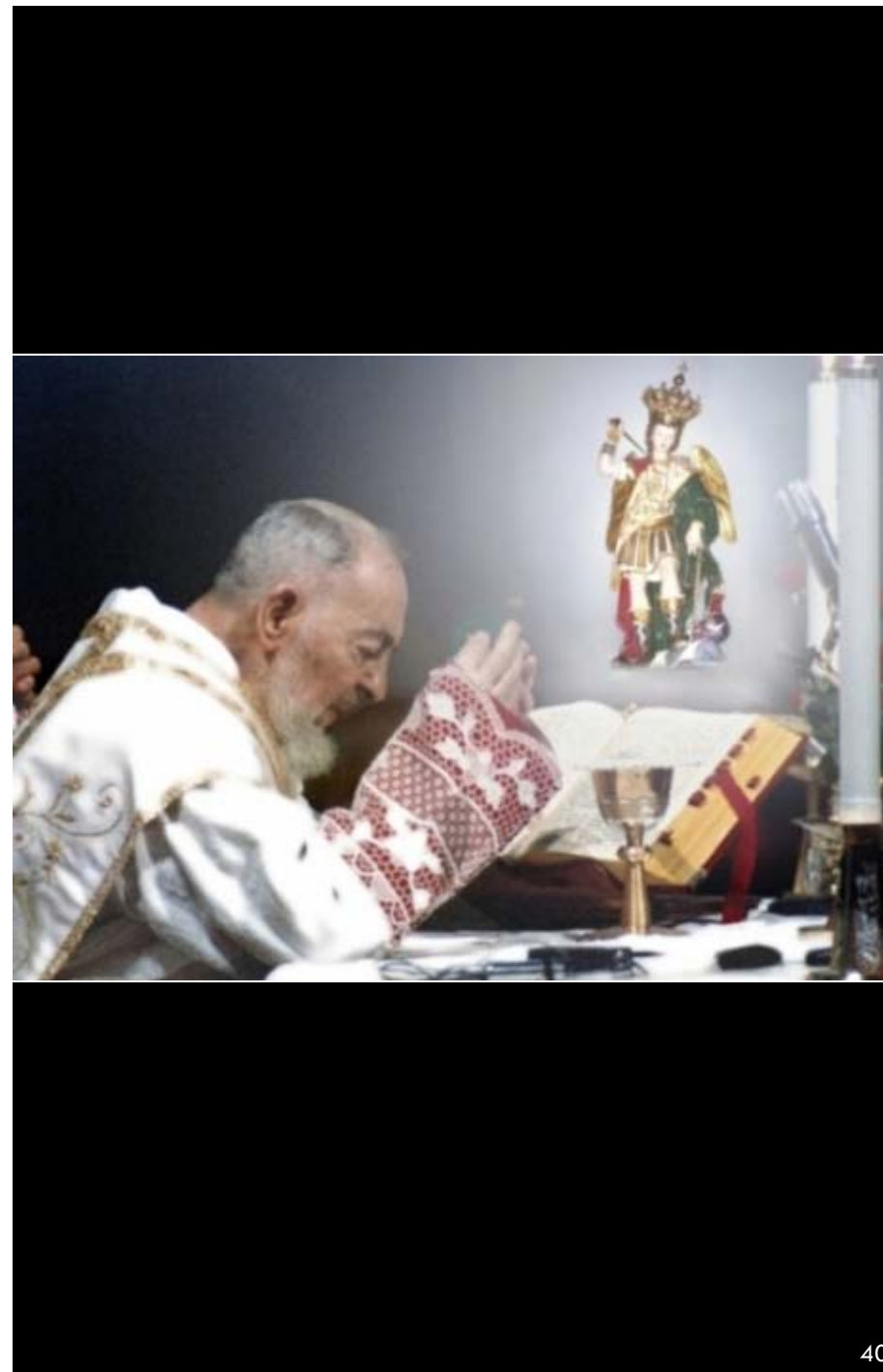
²⁵ S. Campanella, *La missione di Padre Pio. Biografia dalla nascita all'esumazione*, op. cit., p. 62.

Leo XIII's prayer

Before the liturgical reform in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, the Mass ended with a prayer to Our Lady and a prayer to St. Michael. Despite the new discipline, well aware of the archangel Michael's mission to protect and safeguard the people of God, Padre Pio asked the ecclesiastical authorities for permission to continue reciting that prayer. His request was granted.

John Paul II confirmed the importance of this prayer by saying, "Even though this prayer is no longer recited at the end of the Eucharistic celebration, I urge everyone to remember and recite it in order to receive assistance in the battle against the forces of darkness and the spirit of this world"²⁶.

Pope Leo XIII wrote this prayer after having had a vision of infernal spirits gathering over Rome, the Eternal City. He ran into his study, composed the prayer, and immediately ordered it sent to all the bishops of the world for recitation at the end of every Mass. Moved by his great love for the most valiant warrior of the Most High and of the Church, Padre Pio always recited it. This is the prayer: "St. Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle; be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the Devil. May God rebuke him, we humbly pray, and do thou, O Prince of the Heavenly Host, by the power of God, thrust into hell Satan and all evil spirits who wander through the world for the ruin of souls".



39 ²⁶ John Paul II, *Regina Coeli*, April 24, 1994.

St. Michael the Archangel, God's Thurifer

Se sabe del perfume, mejor, The aromas that emanated from Padre Pio are well known: violet, lily, mint, rose, jasmine, and other flowers; or incense, wine, or fresh bread. You could smell them as he passed by, whether in the choir loft, the corridors, the sacristy, or his cell, but they were also detected in the most distant and remote places of the earth. They still are today. They mark his spiritual presence as a guarantee that he is watching over our lives and our needs, an impetus to have faith in God's Providence, an indication that a prayer has been received, or a sign that a grace has been granted.

Giovanni Siena, a writer and spiritual son of Padre Pio, asks himself, "Where do your aromas come from, Padre Pio?". He quickly answers his own question: "From St. Michael"²⁷. It is by no coincidence that the archangel Michael is identified as the thurifer in the visions of the prophet Isaiah and St. John the Evangelist in the Apocalypse.

This interpretation is supported by the formula the priest would pronounce during the blessing of incense in the rite of the Mass prior to the reforms following the Second Vatican Council: "Through the intercession of Blessed Michael the Archangel, who is at the right side of the altar of incense, and of all his elect, may the Lord deign to bless this incense and accept it as a pleasing aroma"²⁸.

The abundance of aromas that Padre Pio emanated attests not only to his sanctity but especially to his privileged relationship with St. Michael the Archangel.



²⁷ G. Siena, *Padre Pio: questa è l'ora degli angeli, L'Arcangelo*, San Giovanni Rotondo (FG) 1976, p. 165.

²⁸ M. Stanzione, *San Pio da Pietrelcina e l'Arcangelo San Michele*, op. cit., p. 33.

Blessed passing

En la primera quincena de septiembre de 1968 – Sometime within the first two weeks of September 1968, fr. Alessio Parente recounts, Mr. J. Kelly came from the United States to San Giovanni Rotondo with a friend. On the 21st, a sick Padre Pio did not celebrate Mass. He did so instead the next day in the presence of many pilgrims who had come for the prayer group convention on the 50th anniversary of Padre Pio's stigmatization. It was his last Mass. At the end of the celebration, he experienced a sort of collapse. Because of this, Mr. Kelly was profoundly disturbed as he left the church.

The next morning he got up at three o'clock in order to make it to Mass with Padre Pio on time. He arrived at the churchyard in front of the church, where a crowd had been patiently waiting outside the door for three hours. One of the friars came out to tell them Padre Pio had died.

It was only then that Mr. Kelly understood and was able to make sense out of what he had seen at dawn. As soon as he had gotten up, he had noticed angels in the sky. He had run to his friend to show them to him, and he too saw them clearly: one majestic angel above the hospital and one above the church with a myriad of smaller angels around them. When the first rays of dawn came through, they all disappeared²⁹.

We can imagine that, given the their assigned tasks and the precious gifts endowed upon them for valor, faith, and purity, the majestic angel over the Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza was St. Raphael, the healing angel, and the angel over the Church of St. Mary of Graces was St. Michael, the Prince of Angels and Padre Pio's inseparable companion.



43 ²⁹ A. Parente, *"Mandami il tuo Angelo Custode"*, Edizioni Padre Pio da Pietrelcina, San Giovanni Rotondo (FG) 2007³, pp. 213-214.

Saints praying to Saints

Entre los testimonios de fe más resplandecientes de nuestro tiempo se John Paul II and Mother Teresa of Calcutta are two of the most brilliant faith witnesses of our time. Both of them went to San Giovanni Rotondo to pray at the tomb of Padre Pio, and these visits are remembered in two paintings located in the crypt where the Capuchin saint lay until April 19, 2010.

It is meaningful to ask ourselves what these great saints all have in common. The answer becomes evident without delay: their fight against the Evil One for the salvation of souls and to reassert God's supremacy over the entire universe.

The role played by the Prince of the Heavenly Host is absolutely essential in this ongoing struggle. Pope Wojtyla stated this clearly during his visit to the Holy Grotto on May 24, 1987. In fact, his words were the following: "This battle against the Devil, which uniquely marks the figure of Michael the Archangel, continues today because the Devil is still alive and working in the world. [...] In this battle, the archangel Michael stands at the Church's side to defend her against all the wicked perversions of this century and to help the faithful resist the Devil, who 'is prowling around like a roaring lion looking for [someone] to devour'"³⁰. It is quite clear how this great pontiff emphasizes the real existence of Satan, who is profoundly disturbed by the idea of holiness. He is particularly disturbed by such holiness as found in John Paul II and Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who are invoked by various exorcists – in addition to St. Michael the Archangel, obviously – in their deliverance prayers³¹.

³⁰ John Paul II, *Address to the citizens of Monte Sant'Angelo*, May 24, 1987 [translation mine].

³¹ F. Bamonte, *Gli angeli ribelli: il mistero del male nell'esperienza di un esorcista* [The Rebel Angels: The Mystery of Evil in the Experiences of an Exorcist], Paoline, Milan 2008.



“Go visit St. Michael”

Padre Pio never missed an opportunity to encourage his spiritual children and any pilgrims who traveled to San Giovanni Rotondo to go visit Monte Sant'Angelo as well and offer their prayers to St. Michael. He also gave many penances during confession that involved honoring St. Michael, one of which was making a pilgrimage to the Holy Grotto. He ardently desired for people to go there. He once said to someone who was uncertain about going, “Yes, yes, you have to go! You have to go to St. Michael on your own two feet, otherwise you’ll end up going with a coffin in tow...”. By these words, he meant that the sins of every man and woman will be weighed on the balance of the Prince of Angels on the Day of Final Judgment. And immediately after the weighing, God Almighty will issue his verdict either awarding eternal life in heaven or condemning to the blazing furnace of hell.

The saint from Pietrelcina still sends this invitation to his devotees today so they will always recall the greatness of St. Michael and so those who do not know him well can discover the radiant light of his purity, his power to fight Satan, and his love for God and all souls.



Afterword

Padre Pio's devotion to St. Michael the Archangel was a special one. Vincenzo Comodo is entirely right to describe it as such. It was special because he benefitted from that invaluable presence every day; because he received comfort and aid throughout the course of an apostolate filled with affliction; and because he received crucial assistance from him in the struggle against the Devil. It was also special because the Prince of the Heavenly Host guided him along those mysterious paths accessible only to mystics. It is true, then: Padre Pio's devotion to St. Michael was a special one.

In fact, I would even raise the semantic dosage and call it *truly* special. But do not think that this emphasis is just a linguistic frill to highlight the quality of the title and content of this traveling photography exhibition. It is not an opportunistic embellishment or a gratuitous homage to this praiseworthy and truly important artistic initiative.

With great modesty, incorporating one of the most suggestive nuances of the Franciscan charism, it is what I can state by looking at the various signs of this devotion present in the Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza and the Church of St. Mary of Graces in San Giovanni Rotondo, which were left by Padre Pio in accordance with his own wishes.

More specifically, I think of the mosaic on the hospital tower and the altar in honor of St. Michael in the church where he celebrated his final Mass. About thirty kilometers away in the "speron d'Italia" [*spur of Italy*], I also think of the visit by the Commander of the Divine Ranks to the Celestial Basilica at Monte Sant'Angelo. But I also think - how could I not! - of how he enthusiastically urged his spiritual children and so many pilgrims who flocked to him to commit themselves to St. Michael's intercession before God.

Indeed, he never missed an opportunity to say, "Go visit St. Michael". And, moving forward, I also think of the many penances he gave in honor of the archangel as a fulfillment of the sacrament of confession, including pilgrimages to the angelic shrine.

These are signs that can be seen and observed by all. My thoughts instantly fly, however, to those invisible signs impressed upon the life of the holy Capuchin that are not ours to know except through the freedom of a certain healthy imagination.

Furthermore, remaining on the semiotic level, I am convinced that Padre Pio himself should be considered a sign of this special devotion both because he passionately invited others to commit themselves to St. Michael's extremely powerful protection and because he would regularly observe two lenten periods in his honor - one in May and one in September, the months in which the first apparitions occurred in Gargano - just as the seraphic St. Francis of Assisi did.

In no uncertain terms, therefore, we can say that Padre Pio was aflame with love for St. Michael. It was a love unknown to many that deserves greater appreciation, and a love Padre Pio transmitted to me and many others.

It is natural, then, to ask how we can be overcome by that same love ourselves. The answer is not difficult: by considering Padre Pio a magnificent witness to the most

glorious and powerful archangel, St. Michael, by going to visit St. Michael at the Holy Grotto at Monte Sant'Angelo, and by committing ourselves to his protection.

San Giovanni Rotondo, may, 29, 2010

Giovanni Siena
Writer and spiritual child
of Padre Pio

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