

From: *National Catholic Register* Written by Matthew Rarey 11/11/2015

(Editor's note: This article was originally published on Oct. 16, 2009.)

Veterans Day is coming up, but there are few vets who have a story to tell like Mario Avignone. His life was changed during World War II when he was stationed near the monastery inhabited by St. Pio of Pietrelcina.

Avignone, a salt-of-the-earth Chicagoan, and two fellow soldiers befriended the stigmatic miracle worker. Since then, he expresses his devotion to the saint by sharing his experiences with others, visiting the sick, and praying with the aid of relics.

After a talk Avignone gave at St. Mary of the Angels Church on the city's North Side, the 90-year-old veteran, over a meal of salmon and gnocchi cooked by his grandson David, spoke of the saint as if he were in the room. Indeed, his enthusiasm and the relics and other devotionals that adorn his home made the holy man's presence seem palpable.

How did you meet him?

When I was stationed in Italy at Cerignola [with the 304th Bomb Wing of the 15th Air Force], we were pretty close to Padre Pio's monastery [at San Giovanni Rotondo]. I knew him for about a year, and after the war, we kept in contact through letters.

But how did I meet him? In 1944 the monsignor there at the church we'd go to by our post could speak a bit of English, and he asked us if we'd ever gotten to see Padre Pio yet. And we asked, "Who is Padre Pio?" So he told us about the stigmata, how he was so popular in Italy.

So the four of us went to the monastery one morning. My buddy Joe served at the Mass with Padre Pio. It was almost two hours long. They say that when he said Mass he was with Christ being crucified. You could see the tears going down his face. Afterward, he spent almost the whole day listening to people's confessions.

Did you ever see St. Pio after the war?

I told him that it'd be great to come back and bring along my wife and kid. "Don't waste your money," he said. "Every time you receive Communion at church, I'll be at your side."

But a year or so after he died, in 1968, my wife and I went to pay our respects. When we went to visit his tomb at the church, my wife said I was in ecstasy, tears streaming down my face while I was there at his tomb, kneeling down and praying. She said I was talking out loud, carrying on a conversation with Padre Pio, but she couldn't hear his voice, just mine. But I could hear his voice. He said he was happy I came to see him.

You could hear him speaking to you? You say it so matter-of-factly.

Nothing surprises me anymore. Not for a long time. Heck, who'd have thought a kid from the South Side of Chicago would end up back in Italy — you know, where my family came from, in the Piedmont — get wounded when a German plane bombed our Liberty ship in the bay in Naples, and end up having a saint as my friend and spiritual father. No, nothing surprises me.

You returned home with relics of St. Pio that seem to have miraculous properties, curing people of terminal illnesses through his intercession. How did you come by them?

Just before we left in '45, Leo, Joe and I were at the monastery, and they were having a birthday party for Padre Pio. After the party was over, Joe saw one of the monks, Father Ignatius, and told him that we'd like to have something special to remember Padre Pio by. What we really wanted was a piece of one of his bandages that he'd worn over his stigmata.

“Oh, no!” he said. “We don't give the bandages away. Padre Pio keeps them locked up in his room. What you're asking me to do is forbidden, and I could get into a lot of trouble.” But we kept talking with him — Joe translating, like always, since his family came from the same part of Italy with the same dialect — and we finally convinced him to get one of those bandages if we promised not to tell anybody — including Padre Pio. He got us one small bandage and divided it in three.

We came back to the monastery not so long after, and Padre Pio stopped us in the hallway. “You naughty boys,” he said, really stern. “You caused one of my brothers to commit sin!”

“Come on, Padre Pio,” says Joe, “what did we do?”

“You know what you did,” he said. “You had Father Ignatius sneak into my room and take one of the bandages and give it to you.”

Nobody told him, but you couldn't fool Padre Pio. He just knew things, which is why he was such a popular confessor.

When he said this, was he truly angry or saying it with a twinkle in his eye?

Oh, he was serious. But then he shook his head and his face sort of softened. He said to Father Ignatius, “I forgive you, Father. And I forgive you boys, too, but don't go telling anybody. I wore those bandages over my heart. Go in peace.” And we did.

You say you have helped people over the years by praying with them and putting them in contact with these relics. Do you believe they have worked actual miracles?

Yes. Well, there was the undertaker. He wouldn't like me to give you his name, but I still see him around the neighborhood. His wife called me up one day, and she was crying. She said, "My husband's been diagnosed with cancer, and we wonder if you could have him come over and say some prayers to Padre Pio and bless him with the things you've got."

So he came over to my house. We went down to the basement with my little altar there. And we prayed together to Padre Pio to ask him to help cure my friend's cancer. About 10 days or so later, his wife called me up. She was crying and laughing and told me, "My husband just got home from the doctor and told us the cancer is gone." And then she asked me, "How can I thank Padre Pio?"

"Don't thank him, thank God," I tell her. "He's his boss."

Then there was the day a long time ago when a couple came to my house with a baby that was very sick. I didn't know what I was going to do, not having really done too much of this yet. After all, I'm just a guy who works at the office at the paint factory and just happened to know Padre Pio personally. So we said a prayer to him, and I touched the baby's forehead with Padre Pio's bandage. And a couple weeks later, they told me the doc said the baby's okay.

Why should we know St. Pio?

Of course, there's nothing in Church teaching saying you've got to believe in Padre Pio. When he was alive, a lot of priests in Italy itself resented him. They said he was a fake. They were proven wrong. But why should people know Padre Pio? I guess for the same reason that people know and trust in Christ and our Blessed Mother even though they've never met them in person. Padre Pio is powerful, a great intercessor, a friend on our behalf. He changed my life and made most of my 90 years pretty happy since I met him in the war. He brought so many people during his own lifetime back to the Church. And he still does.

Matthew A. Rarey writes from Chicago.

Read more: <http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/a-veteran-meets-the-faith/#ixzz3rCc9Ubva>